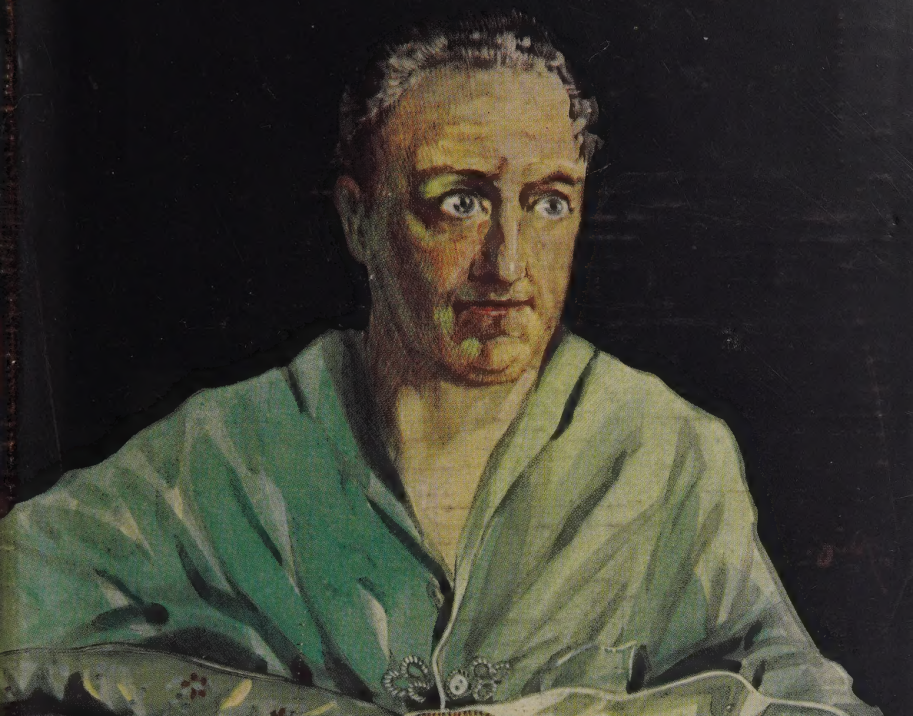


EDEN PHILLPOTTS



**A VOICE  
FROM  
THE DARK**

AUTHOR OF

**"THE RED REDMAYNES," "THE GREY ROOM,"  
"THE THREE BROTHERS," etc.**

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**By  
EDEN PHILLPOTTS**

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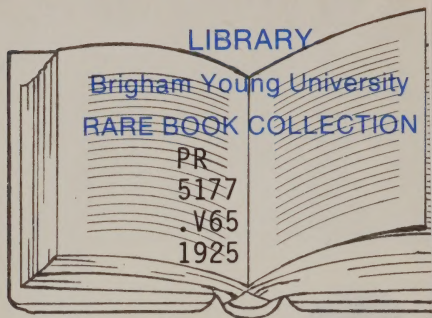
“The Grey Room,”

“The Three Brothers,” etc.

Here is a tale of mystery and adventure written with great originality and power. It deals with a crime so monstrous and cruel as to challenge credibility. Yet, with that deft simplicity which is the mark of genius, the author creates John Ringrose, a man who has been described as the most acutely characterised detective in fiction. And with fitting preservation of reality and logic he carries us step by step along the dark and devious road of his theme without an instant's faltering of the swift, compelling pace, to an astounding climax of retributive justice—ingenious, convincing, and heartily satisfying.







BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY



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A VOICE FROM THE DARK





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Dark : : : By  
Eden Phillpotts : : Author of  
"The Grey Room," "The Red Redmaynes." : : :*

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# A VOICE FROM THE DARK

## CHAPTER I

### THE GHOST

THE Old Manor House Hotel rose upon high land facing south. Perched on a plateau six hundred feet above the sea it stood, with a ridge of fallow and woodland behind it, while farms dotted the slopes seaward and a stream ran through the valley beneath. Beyond this vale the coast line ascended once more to a range of irregular and open downs from which fell low, sponge-coloured cliffs to the shore. Due south swept the English Channel, while easterly ran Chesil Bank, and lifting like a cloud above the winter waves, there loomed the dim and massy heights of Portland Bill.

The Old Manor House stood at a cross-roads, in lonely, wind-swept country, and largely depended for success upon sportsmen and wayside custom. Few persons stopped at the inn for more than a night or two, when hounds were due to meet on the outlying commonlands; but now, in the dusk of a November evening, a motor from the neighbouring market town of Bridport drew up at the entrance and one wayfarer alighted at the wide porch of stone. Only in the centre

of the building did any second story rise. To east and west the ground floor extended in narrow wings; while the yard, loose boxes, stables and other outbuildings lay grouped in the rear.

John Ringrose, leaping to the ground, drew out his luggage and gun-case, then rang a bell which boomed heavily within.

He was a brisk man of five and fifty; with spare and active habit and build. His clean-shaven countenance attracted by its genial and kindly expression; his shrewd eyes revealed a twinkle of humour in them. Life had not robbed him of that, though people who knew how his life had been spent wondered, foolishly, why its progress could create such a benignant attitude toward his fellow creatures. But John was ever a humanist; experience lacked the power to change that gift of Nature.

Mr. Ringrose was clad in a large-checked Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers, with worsted stockings on his wiry legs. He wore a cap over his short grey hair, and heavy, square-toed shoes of dark-brown leather. He twisted up his nose now—a little trick of which he was unconscious—and allowed himself to survey a familiar scene. He knew these uplands of Dorset very well, but he had never stopped before at the Old Manor House. He was here at the invitation of the landlord; for he had within the past year done Mr. Jacob Brent an inestimable service.

Mr. Brent himself now filled his porch and displayed keen pleasure at the visitor's arrival. He was a stout, simple man of vast proportions—too big, as he always declared, to permit himself either hurry or annoyance. A white beard obscured the lower portion of his face

and above it rose a wide, gentle brow and a big nose inclined to be ruddy. Jacob's eyes were large and grey. They blinked behind steel-rimmed glasses. His immense shoulders had grown round ; his back seemed somewhat bowed beneath the weight of his great head. Had he been able to stand quite upright he must have been a man of six feet four inches ; and despite his permanent stoop he towered above John Ringrose, who stood no more than five feet eight.

A hearty welcome greeted the newcomer and he was presently conveyed to his room, where a fire burned. John's chamber stood in the left wing of the building and the approach lay through a passage.

It was the visitor's custom to acquaint himself exactly with any quarters into which he might be called to spend the night. " When I'm going to lose consciousness in a strange bed, I always want to know all about my surroundings, if possible," Mr. Ringrose was wont to say.

He discovered now that his window opened five feet above the highway outside, being divided therefrom by a strip of grass and a railing only. It was a square, commonplace window, fastened with the usual bolt. The door opened in a line with it, where the passage terminated, and the room completed the eastern wing, so that three of its sides represented outer walls. The solitary inner wall separated the visitor's bedroom from the next, which also opened upon the passage. The fireplace stood in an outer wall, and no features of any interest marked the square chamber destined for a fortnight to contain Mr. Ringrose during his hours of sleep. A heavy curtain drew across the window and a white blind descended behind the curtain. The



room was lighted by an electric bulb over a dressing-table.

John Ringrose unpacked his luggage and stowed his clothes in a chest of drawers. He noted a hanging cupboard let into the thickness of one wall, and there disposed of his coats. At the bottom he stored his cartridges, gun-case, sporting leggings and boots. For he was here to enjoy the rough shooting that his friend had promised him.

Presently he arranged a few books and a dispatch box and leathern desk on a table in the window, and then, setting a wire guard over his fire, he left the room and joined his host in a private office where tea awaited him.

Mr. Brent was a widower and, thanks to his visitor's services, his only son, a clerk in a private bank at Yeovil, had been proved innocent of very serious charges brought against him. The young man, the soul of honesty, had been the cat's-paw for a couple of very thorough rascals, and the pair were now serving their sentence, while Jacob Brent's son was completely exonerated, thanks to the professional acumen of Mr. Ringrose. The lad's father, more than grateful for such services, had long ago extended an open invitation to the detective, and now, as he drank some excellent China tea, the younger man defined his purpose in his usual exact fashion.

"I always meant to come, Brent. Not likely I was going to lose the chance of a good time and a bit of sport in your fine country; but I must tell you how the land lies. I've retired, as you know—didn't want to yet; but I'm not greedy, and I've done my bit, and I've a great belief in the next generation. So I've

made way and gone before the need to go arose. And by way of work—for I'll never stop working at one thing or another—I mean to write a book."

"There's nothing you can't do," vowed Mr. Brent.

"I wish I thought so; but the Chief put the idea in my head. 'You'll never twiddle your thumbs, Ringrose,' he said to me. 'I've just started to write my recollections of Scotland Yard, and you can't do better than follow my example; and your book will be much more exciting reading than mine.' Those were Sir James Ridgway's very words. So there it is; I've cast loose, and I've got a good lot of interesting stuff, no doubt, full of the bright side of human nature as well as sensation and crime and mystery. And I'm going to see if I can get order into it. I've planned the book, and I'd much have liked one more good, sporting case to finish with; but I'm out of the game now and must do the best with what I've got."

"Lord, man! You've been in enough fearful and perilous affairs to fill ten books, I should reckon."

"Not the way I tell 'em. You can soon boil down a case to the bare bones, and I've never wasted words in my business, Brent, and I shan't waste more than I can help in my book. So now we come to the point. You've asked me for a fortnight. And when that fortnight is ended, if I like the place and the run of the country, I'm going to offer to stay with you for a few months, and enjoy a bit of sport off and on, and put my time—most of it—into my book. How will that suit you?"

"Surprising well," declared the innkeeper. "And we won't quarrel about the terms, neither. I owe you more than six months' board and lodging, Ringrose,

and to have a great man like you under my roof will pay me better than money. Because I'm an ignorant chap, but always wishful to learn when anybody's inclined to teach."

"Who else lives here?"

"Only one chronic—our Mrs. Bellairs. She's a dear old lady struck with paralysis, and this is her home nowadays. She and her maid, Miss Manley, have been with me for two years now, and she means to bide till her end. One old friend or another will look her up now and again, but she's very lonely, because she's very old and has outlived her generation. There was a romantical idea that brought her here. She spent her honeymoon at the Old Manor House, fifty years ago in my father's time, and she took a liking to it for that reason; and after she'd been here for a few weeks for her health she ordained to stop for the rest of her life. It suits her and it suits me, for she's very game and bright, though eighty-four years of age."

Mr. Ringrose nodded.

"Sometimes old women of a bygone generation have a lot of wit," he said. "My own mother was such a one. An amazing fine memory she had, and a sense of humour, and a very forgiving heart for the sins of others, as people with a sense of humour generally do have."

At dinner that night the detective met his fellow guest. She was a comely old lady with a strong, sensitive face, and blue eyes still bright. She wore a purple gown with much lace upon it, a diamond brooch, which Mr. Ringrose judged to be of considerable value, and over her snow-white hair a dainty cap, where a purple bow sat in more lace. Her old,

thin hands were still beautiful and she used them freely in conversation. But her lower limbs were paralyzed and she never left her invalid chair in public. She was drawn to the dining-table by her maid, and Mr. Ringrose stood up to greet her. Her attendant looked nearly as old as herself—a little, wizened, brown-faced woman, still straight in the back and with a face not lacking intelligence and character. She spoke primly and correctly, but her rôle was to listen, for Mrs. Bellairs loved to talk. Mr. Ringrose, who always put on a black frock coat in the evening, found himself pleasantly attracted by his fellow guest. The old lady proved genial and hearty. She was also shrewd and revealed an extensive knowledge of the world. She ate little and pressed the newcomer to drink a glass of port from her private bottle when the meal was concluded.

“ I sit up for an hour in the drawing-room after dinner,” she said, “ and Manley is good enough to read to me as a rule. But if you are going to join us, then we won’t read, but talk instead. I appear at lunch, but not sooner. My little suite is in the west wing. You must come and smoke your cigar in my sitting-room and see the beautiful view some day.”

“ You don’t mind tobacco ? ” he asked.

“ Far from it. I still enjoy a cigarette myself sometimes.”

Ringrose knew that they were ignorant of his fame, as he had directed his host to keep that a profound secret. He felt, therefore, that under those circumstances a friendship might be developed if the old lady desired it.

Now he chatted with Mrs. Bellairs for an hour and then returned to the bar parlour, drank the one whisky



and water he permitted himself and retired early to bed. For five minutes he stood alone under the inn porch and looked out upon the night. It was rough, wet and forbidding. When the wind lulled between gusts, Mr. Ringrose could hear the thunder of the waves two miles distant beneath the cliffs, and through the murk eastward a faint pencil of light behind Portland Bill flashed aloft from the distant lighthouse. The inn was far removed from the nearest cottage, and the few men who had assembled in the bar soon departed. John's bedroom presented a snug and cheerful scene, the fire was burning brightly. The electric light would need to be altered, in the visitor's opinion. He must have a hand lamp upon his desk, for many evening hours he doubted not would be spent in literary labour.

Mr. Ringrose was soon prepared for rest, and as he sank into a feather bed he perceived that other changes would be necessary. A hard bed was necessary to his comfort. He soon slept, however, and slept well.

And then a voice in the room awakened him. Indeed it must have roused a heavier sleeper than the retired officer of the police, for its tones were shrill, piercing, and laden with mental agony. A child cried out in pain and terror; and John Ringrose, who, though a bachelor, loved children very heartily, sat up with indignation and heard every word of the frenzied appeal.

"Please—please—I will be good—I will be good, Mr. Bitton! Don't let him see me—don't let him come—please—please!"

The words were nothing to the frenzy of childish fear with which they were uttered. They ended in a sob of terror, so abject that the listener already felt

a fierce indignation banish sleep. He calculated that not two seconds elapsed between the last moan of the child's voice and the flash of the electric light, the button of which stood in the wall beside his bed. But the room was empty. He leaped to the door and unlocked it, only to find no sign of any living thing in the dark passage outside. He then hastened to the window, but the curtains were drawn and the window bolted. The room itself contained no place, save the cupboard, wherein the smallest child could hide, but the cupboard held nothing but John's gear.

Mr. Ringrose looked at the time. It was three o'clock. His fire had gone out and, in the silence, he marked a rough wind blowing round the corner of the old house in which his chamber was situated. Then he heard the heavy footfall of horses in the road. The creatures were alone, wandering by night as cattle will. He drew his blind and looked out. Two big, black cart-horses moved together. One whinnied and seemed to laugh at something his companion had told him. At the flash of the light from his window upon the empty road, both great beasts started and galloped heavily away. The wind shouted after them and the rain fell.

Mr. Ringrose drew the blind, put on his dressing-gown and went into the passage. He took his electric torch with him and peered about. But the house was silent, buried in darkness and sleep. Not a breath or murmur came from the room next his own. He tried the handle of the door and it gave to him. The room, a facsimile of that in which he had slept, was quite empty. A dust cloth covered the bed and he lifted it, to find only the mattress beneath. The cupboard door

he flung open. That too, was empty. He returned to his own apartment and repeated to himself the words which he had heard :

“ Please—please—I will be good—I will be good, Mr. Bitton ! Don’t let him see me—don’t let him come—please—please ! ”

John Ringrose wrote down the words ; then he took off his dressing gown, locked the door again, turned out the electric light and went back to bed. He lay listening for an hour and was not disturbed. Presently he slept and did not waken until a maid called him.

## CHAPTER II

### THE GHOST AGAIN

ONE of the secrets of the retired detective's success had been his own remarkable powers of suppression. No man had ever played a lone hand oftener, or brought more problems to their solution by solving them without assistance from his colleagues. To do this he had frequently taken risks from which most men might reasonably have shrunk ; but he was a bachelor with none depending upon his exertions, and he had found that secrecy was at least as valuable to justice as to the malefactor, who sought to escape from it. Sometimes he had been blamed for his methods and charged with subjecting himself to needless perils ; but Mr. Ringrose felt far too assured of his own system to change it, and his inveterate rule of conduct now held with him over the present singular experience. With morning he made a further examination of his own apartment and that which adjoined it. He also scrutinised the grass outside his bedroom window, only to satisfy himself that no foot-step had pressed it. He strove to explain the incident rationally and suspected that the day would furnish a natural explanation. As he shaved himself, he stated the case—a process that had often served to throw light. He ruled out any supernatural explanation.



"I wake at three o'clock," said Mr. Ringrose, "and the reason for so doing is a voice in my ears—a child's voice throbbing with terror—a horrible thing—a young child crying out, as the little ones will when faced with punishment, that they will be good. Mr. Bitton—Mr. Bitton was the trouble. 'Don't let him see me, Mr. Bitton.' First, Mr. Bitton, then, secondly, somebody else the child didn't want to see. And all apparently in the middle of this empty room! From the moment of the last moan of that poor little wretch to the time I turned on the light can't have been above two seconds—probably less. But the room was empty—no child and nobody else. Did I imagine it? No, it's not the sort of thing you imagine."

Before he went to breakfast Mr. Ringrose had come to a conclusion. He would say nothing whatever of his experience and see if the explanation came to him along natural channels. He would inquire neither for Mr. Bitton nor another, but learn quietly the order of things at the Old Manor House and all that need be known concerning those who dwelt therein.

He found the occupants of the hotel to consist of half a dozen women and three men, not including Mrs. Bellairs and her maid. An ostler, a gardener and cowman in one, a boots, who also waited and did indoor work, represented Mr. Brent's masculine staff. Despite his great size he was always busy himself and looked after the electric plant, his special pride. None of the men was called "Bitton," nor did Ringrose hear the name mentioned.

He settled down quickly, and since the weather was very wet and foul, kept much indoors. On the third morning after his arrival the detective saw a meet of

hounds ; and he shot a brace of partridge during the afternoon of that day. He made ready friends of all at the Old Manor House, for he was of a gracious and genial spirit and took unaffected interest in his fellow creatures.

Three nights were undisturbed ; but he had locked the room adjoining his own and kept the key. And then the ghostly child cried once more and, in the dark hour before dawn, another frenzied petition rang out :

“ Don’t let him see me—don’t let him see me—please—please, Mr. Bitton ! ”

Wakened by that piercing voice, John Ringrose turned on the light and leaped from his bed as before. But the room lay empty ; the night was very still and the moon shone on the white road outside. He looked at the time and then hastened into the room adjoining his own ; but it was locked and just as he had last examined it. He locked the door again and withdrew.

There were no children at the Old Manor House and he had never heard a child mentioned. He remained wide awake, his eyes fixed upon his room. Then he turned out his light again and listened patiently, ready to leap out at the whisper of a voice. But all continued silent. He started once at a sound, but knew it for the cry of an owl. The listener slept at last and was not again awakened until a maid brought his early cup of tea. He now determined to relate his adventure and hesitated a little in whom to confide. John Ringrose was no bigot, and many extraordinary incidents within his own experience had taught him to keep an open mind before phenomena. But he was logical and his intuitions had never been divorced from reason. What had now happened to him ? He

had twice heard a human voice speaking—at his elbow apparently—and twice turned on the light to find the room empty.

“ Much virtue in ‘ apparently,’ ” thought he. “ And yet the voice was there, though the child who cried out was not.”

He followed his thoughts and they led him to conclude, as before, that he had been the victim of some aural illusion. An ear can be as easily deceived as an eye—perhaps more easily, for to locate sound under the most favourable circumstances is often difficult.

He determined to relate his experience to a woman. Better knowledge of Mrs. Bellairs had convinced him that, within her broken body, still harboured an exceedingly intelligent mind. She was well read along certain lines; she revealed a kindly nature and a toleration of life that much appealed to the visitor. Little guessing at the immediate and extraordinary effect of his narrative upon her, he chose the following evening, and then, when he smoked by the fire in the little drawing-room after dinner and the old lady chatted, he mentioned his experience.

“ I’m going to tell you something rather curious,” he said, “ and I may add that I have mentioned it to nobody until the present moment. I’m mystified by a happening that may be capable of simple explanation; but solve it single-handed I cannot, though I have tried,”

He related exactly what had occurred; but he had only reached the first experience when his listener showed signs of deep emotion. She clutched her chair, dropped her crochet and stared. Her mouth fell open and she threatened to faint. Mr. Ringrose was quick

to see that he had done a dangerous thing, and leaped to his feet, while the old lady, making a great effort to keep her nerve, pointed to a table beyond her reach where, beside her bag, stood a little cut-glass bottle of smelling salts. He brought it instantly and in a few moments she recovered her composure ; but she was much agitated and her voice shook when she thanked him.

The detective expressed deepest regret and proposed to call her maid ; but Mrs. Bellairs shook her head.

" Wait," she said. " I shall be all right in a minute. You have told me something that is much more terrific to me than it can be to you—till you know."

She shivered and drew her shawl round her, while the lace cap on her white head shook.

" Tell me all you've got to tell and then I'll speak," she said. " You've heard a ghost, Mr. Ringrose. That is as certain as anything can be."

She was collected now ; and her voice grew a little stronger. But her eyes were haunted by her thoughts and she still trembled.

He concluded his story in as few words as possible, while the listener attended closely, with her smelling salts in her hand.

" You saw nothing ? " she asked when he had done.

" Nothing whatever. I only heard a child's voice in the very depth of terror. I love children, and I confess the sound of that frantic, suffering youngster's voice made me savage. But there was nobody there."

" That child is dead. He died more than a year ago," said Mrs. Bellairs.

" You knew him ? "

" Quite well, poor little fellow."



“ And Mr. Bitton ? ”

“ The man, Bitton, was his attendant. An old servant of the family, who came to wait upon the boy. The child was here for his health—so everybody understood.”

“ And is Mr. Bitton still in the land of the living ? ”

“ He is—accursed scoundrel.”

Mr. Ringrose, feeling assured that the speaker was now restored, and wakening to a very lively interest at what she told him, lighted his cigar again and spoke.

“ We appear to be on the threshold of an extraordinary situation,” he said. “ I keep an open mind and allow for my own limitations of knowledge. Our senses can play many tricks, Mrs. Bellairs ; but surely some things they cannot do. A child’s voice—the voice of a child, who you tell me died more than a year ago—has most clearly and distinctly twice spoken in my hearing by night. The voice addressed a Mr. Bitton—a name I have never heard before—and he prayed and implored Mr. Bitton not to allow a third party to see him. The third party was not mentioned by name ; but I suppose it was another man. ‘ Don’t let him see me ’—that was the prayer uttered on both occasions, when I heard the child’s terrified voice in my ear. That’s all I know about it, and now the question is, will it weary you to tell me what you know, or would you rather leave it for another occasion ? ”

“ I must tell you,” she answered. “ I shan’t sleep or have a moment’s peace until I have told you. Indeed, whether I tell you or not, I feel as though I should hardly know a moment’s peace again. I have never believed in ghosts, but now I must ! ”

## CHAPTER III

### “ LUDO ”

BEFORE Mrs. Bellairs began her narrative she directed John Ringrose to summon her maid.

“ I should wish Susan to hear the story, too, that she may check me in every particular,” declared the old lady. “ Susan knows it quite as well as I do, and she hates Arthur Bitton quite as much.”

When Miss Manley joined her mistress the elder challenged her closest attention.

“ At his wish I am going to tell Mr. Ringrose the story of little Ludovic Bewes,” she began, “ and if I say a syllable more or less than the truth, or forget anything—even the least detail—don’t hesitate to correct me, Susan. And push my chair a little nearer to the fire. I have had an extraordinary experience, and I’m cold and rather frightened still.”

“ Take your time, madam,” begged the listener, “ and don’t permit yourself to feel any fear. In my experience few things happen that are incapable of explanation, if we’re only patient and refuse to be deceived or alarmed. And nothing happens by chance, either. There’s always a cause for every effect, and when we speak of chance it only means we are ignorant of the cause.”

Then Mrs. Bellairs proceeded with her story :

“ Rather more than a year ago, Mr. Ringrose, there came to the Old Manor House a child and his attendant. He was a little boy of thirteen years, but frail and delicate, and small for his age. He was ill and his nerves appeared to be the trouble. Little Ludovic Bewes—— ”

“ The Honourable Ludovic Bewes,” interrupted Miss Manley.

“ I was coming to that, Susan. As a matter of fact he wasn’t the Honourable Ludovic Bewes then ; because his father, the late Lord Brooke, was dead. The child had succeeded to the title. Lord Brooke, his father, died in Italy, leaving two orphaned children, for little ‘ Ludo,’ as everybody called him, had a sister older than himself. The family place is Brooke-Norton, a big mansion in the midst of its estates and farms somewhere to the west of Bridport. Well, the child came here for the benefit of his health, and with him came a man, a family servant. His name was Arthur Bitton. He might have been fifty—a quiet, clean-shaved, ordinary-looking man, very reserved and very attentive to the child. His hair was just turning grey, and he had grey eyes and a hard mouth, and, despite his courtesy and trained manners, you felt he was a man of character.”

“ Of bad character,” declared Susan.

“ No, I wouldn’t say that. Not at first,” continued Mrs. Bellairs. “ What happened afterward showed that he was a cruel devil ; but nothing he did, or said in front of you, or anybody here, ever suggested he was. In fact, the landlord, Mr. Brent, has always judged that Susan and I were utterly wrong about him. We must be absolutely fair.”

“ The child feared him, however.”

“ The child did. Ludo was always civil and cringing before him, and he was always scrupulously kind to the lad—indeed, tender and gentle—when anybody else was by. But you had only to look at Ludovic’s eyes to see what the little boy really felt. That was the first thing I noticed about him ; and Susan noticed it, too. The child was allowed to come to me sometimes on a wet afternoon, for I love children and liked to amuse him. I also studied him. He was a highly strung, very nervous boy. A sudden gust of wind, or a shout from the road, would make him jump and turn pale. But youth was on his side, and sometimes he would forget his troubles and talk about his sister and his dead father and his uncle.”

“ His uncle ? ”

“ The present Lord Brooke.”

“ Ah ! ” said Mr. Ringrose. “ The wicked uncle ! ”

“ Far from it. A very remarkable young man—one of the most remarkable I have met in my long life. I’m coming to him. Susan, who saw more of Mr. Bitton than I did, strove to learn all that she could without indecent curiosity, and she heard that the child was the victim of a morbid brain trouble which might at any time end either in loss of his mind, or fatally. A doctor came to see the little patient once a week, and sometimes the attendant said that Ludo was pronounced better, and sometimes the medical man thought him not so well. I met the doctor myself once, as Susan was wheeling me in from my constitutional, and ventured to speak to him before he got into his car. He is Doctor Morris Davidson, a Scot, practising at Bridport. He spoke readily and was not



very hopeful. The child suffered from delusions and could not sleep. He told of visions and horrors, but was always vague, and his health did not respond to the conditions of the Old Manor House as his uncle hoped it would.

"Time went on and then came our hideous discovery. Only an accident led us to any suspicions whatever; but one night I was very indisposed and called Susan, who sleeps in the adjoining room. It must have been between two and three o'clock. I needed brandy, for I felt a chill and suffered from a rigor. She went to my private room and was just entering it when, far away in the other wing, she heard a scream. She described the cry as one of agonised terror; and when she returned to me with the brandy she told me of her experience. 'It was Ludo,' she said. Knowing her to be absolutely fearless I bade her try to find out what was amiss, and she left me and made an excursion down the passage that runs the length of the house front. The child's room was the last—that in which you sleep, Mr. Ringrose; and the room next to him was occupied by Arthur Bitton. They are, as you know, far from the centre of the house, and a child might cry his head off there and not be heard by anybody at night. But, in the silence, Susan had heard that shriek of terror, and now, very bravely and without a light, she explored. There are nooks in the doorways of the passage, and presently she reached to within two doors of Bitton's room and there hid in the alcove and listened. For a little while she heard nothing and then the shriek came again. Ludo was screaming for Mr. Bitton. What did he say, Susan?"

" 'He's here! He's here! He's come again,

Arthur ! Arthur, Arthur, Mr. Bitton, he's come again ! He's looking at me ! ' That's what the child screamed. Then there was a shriek and not another sound. I guessed he'd fainted," said Miss Manley.

The detective felt the blood mount to his face. If he had a weakness, it was a hatred, fierce and deep, of cruelty to children.

Mrs. Bellairs continued :

" You see, something, or somebody, was in that room with him. Either he imagined someone, or really saw someone. And when Susan told me of her terrible experience I guessed that the poor little brain was working in the night and conjuring horrors as we knew it did. But I understand better now. Susan waited. She didn't know, of course, if Bitton was in the room with the child, or in his own. For ten minutes she waited, and then a light shone and the door of Bitton's room opened. He came out in his dressing-gown, carrying a lighted candle. She saw him clearly and his face showed nothing. He was wide awake and alert, but he revealed no surprise or anxiety. Only he looked evil to Susan, and she confessed that she felt a strange feeling of being in the presence of something horrible. Bitton went into the child's room and shut the door. She heard him speak in his usual gentle, kindly voice, and she heard Ludo weeping convulsively. The child then spoke. ' Let me come in to you ; let me come in to you ! ' he said. He was pleading to share the valet's bed, where the poor little wretch would no doubt have felt safe."

" My God ! " said Mr. Ringrose. " Go on, ma'am."

" Susan didn't stop any longer. She returned and told me ; and I needn't tell you I didn't sleep again

that night. I bade Susan drink some brandy, too, and we talked till the grey of the dawn and wondered if we ought to do anything about it. I wanted to write to his uncle the next morning and ask him to come and see me ; but Susan, who is longer sighted than I am, thought we had better wait and do nothing rash. She pointed out—What did you point out, Susan ? ”

“ I pointed out this, madam : that we didn’t know enough. We only knew the child had ugly dreams and fancies, and suffered at night, and couldn’t get his rest, and had a disordered brain. That the doctor told you, and Arthur Bitton had told me the same. The doctor was a gentleman above suspicion. Therefore, I said it might all be true ; and that I had perhaps only heard the poor child in one of his terrors ; and that the thing he had seen and prayed to be saved from might be some fearful shadow sprung out of his poor little weak wits.”

“ So you did. And more than that you said. With great pluck Susan asked me if she should try and get a sight of the child’s room when he wasn’t in it. I applauded the idea and we waited for an opportunity. On fine mornings Bitton always took Ludo for a walk over the commons, or down to the sea. He said the child slept better when he was physically tired, and so he would take him for long tramps generally before his dinner, which he ate in the middle of the day. But soon after that horrible night a better chance offered ; Mr. Bitton asked Susan if she thought I’d mind having the boy with me for an afternoon. He very much wanted to visit his master at Brooke-Norton, and it would be a convenience to him if he

might do this. Of course we had told him nothing of Susan's adventure three nights earlier.

“ I agreed readily, and so we got our chance. The child was very poorly and fearfully nervous. I could almost see death in his little face and my heart bled for him. But I tried to cheer him up and had ordered an extra good tea. He didn't much care for games that afternoon, and I could see he was very tired. But his fears relaxed with me. He played a little card game with me and then began to nod. Susan brought him to the fire and put him a big chair, and in two minutes he was asleep. I felt frightened then, for fear he would wake screaming at some of his awful dreams ; and once he did wake with a sudden start and a world of horror in his big, brown eyes ; but I spoke gently to him and he saw where he was and smiled and snuggled down again and slept soundly. Meantime, Susan had started on her great adventure. Go on, Susan. You can tell this part better than I.”

“ It was a dull sort of an afternoon,” said Miss Manley, “ and I knew nobody would be down that way, so I waited my time and, when I'd spoke to the housemaid and seen her out of the wing, I went down the passage. I thought, maybe, the doors might be locked, but the man was far too clever to do anything suspicious like that. The doors were open and the windows were open. And first I poked about in the child's room and pried into every hole and corner. That's your room, Mr. Ringrose, and I didn't find anything to fright a mouse. All in order, and all tidy and trim as a good manservant would have it. The little boy's clothes were of the best and his underwear beautiful, and his shoes and leggings likewise. The



bed was on two inside walls to the right of the door when you go in."

"So it is now," said the listener.

"Beside it stood a night lamp holding a night light, and his medicine bottles and wineglass were on the mantelshelf. He had a fire at night, and the fire was laid, but not lighted. Not a sign of anything to make you doubtful. So then I went into Bitton's room, and there all was just as neat and tidy and methodical. Everything as trim and cared for and in its proper place as any trained bachelor man might be expected to have it. Such neatness I never did see ; and everything was as straightforward and simple as you can imagine. I looked in his chest of drawers and hanging cupboard, and opened the box in the corner, for it weren't locked. In fact, it seemed to me almost suspicious in itself—a grown man having no secrets."

Mr. Ringrose smiled.

"Good for you, Miss Manley," he said. "There's very few folk—men or women—that haven't a private key somewhere !"

"So I thought," continued the prim old maid. "And I looked for it. I used my eyes and my fingers. And then—strange you should mention a key, because a little, tiny key I did find. It weren't much bigger than my thumb nail and I only got it by a lucky chance. Yes, he slipped there ; and yet you can't blame him, for of course he didn't guess there was a secret enemy under his roof, so to speak. I'd studied everything--to the Bible and Prayer-book on his table in the window, and his writing-desk and writing material also ; and I even opened a letter on it, which began 'My Dear Man.' Then I looked at the end and saw it

was from a woman by the name of Jane Lake. And I knew he was engaged to marry that woman, for she'd been to see him once or twice. She seemed a good, cheerful sort, and I didn't read the letter. Then I remembered that Bitton had gone off in his best clothes, and I ordained to run my finger through the pockets of his everyday suit hanging up in his cupboard. Something made me do it, and I know now, of course, it was meant I should do so. They were empty till I put a finger into the watch-pocket of his waistcoat ; and I felt something—the tiny key. Not a watch-key, though.

“ But a key weren't any use without a lock to put it in, and I'd turned over everything and opened every drawer and cupboard, and his hand-bag and his box and his ' Gladstone ' also. So I looked round again and there, sure enough, was something else, that might be open or not. Up on the top of the cupboard was a ledge. The cupboard is let into the wall, same as the one in your room, Mr. Ringrose, and there's a ledge on top. And on that ledge was Bitton's hat-box. Because, of a Sunday, when he always took little Ludo to church, very pious and proper, he wore a silk hat and a clean shirt, and so on.

“ I got up on a chair and reached down the box and it was locked. And the little key fitted. So I opened it, and I've often thanked God I was down on the ground again before I did so, for there was that in it that turned my knees to water and brought me flop to the floor, as if I'd been smote on the head. I've never fainted in all my life, but I came nearer to it then than ever I did before. His hat was there all right, and in it something that seemed rolled up in a piece of red

silk—something hard and round the size and shape of a big coconut. And I brought it out and found myself staring at the fearfulest object the hand of a devil could have made ! ”

Miss Manley panted with the recollection and her mistress bade her pause.

“ Keep calm, Susan, and take your time,” she murmured.

“ ’Twas a head,” continued the speaker. “ A head, with stiff, red hair springing up off it, and a face that you might see in hell, I should think. Great yellow eyes, and a hole for the nose, and a mouth set with long teeth like a dog’s. It weren’t so much the puppet’s features, you understand, as the general effect. You might think from what I tell you such a thing would only be comic to a grown-up person ; but far from it, Mr. Ringrose. It was shocking ! It looked alive, for the eyes were glass, and evil properly stared out of them. You can only say it was a very wicked thing ; and this I know, that first sight of it will haunt me to my grave.”

“ She doesn’t exaggerate,” declared Mrs. Bellairs. “ It was the embodiment of horror—a hideous mask that might have frozen anybody’s blood. To call it grotesque is not enough. It was—it was damnable, Mr. Ringrose.”

“ You saw it, madam ? ”

“ I did. Go on, Susan.”

“ When I got my wits back I examined it,” proceeded Miss Manley, “ and my mind moved quick. I knew by a flash of instinct that it was this that the child had screamed at. It was this he saw come creeping to him in the night ! There was a hook in its

'material' as we are accustomed to use it of the matter we know. A ghost—for reasons hidden from us—might revisit the scenes wherein, as a living human being, it suffered terror, committed crime, or died a violent death; but it could never speak with the living voice of man, or express its torments exactly as it had done when enduring them—for the reason that a throat woven of its etheric material would be powerless to produce such a voice."

"That, I believe, is recognised," said Mrs. Bellairs, "and, for that reason, the spirit world, when it would communicate with us, demands a go-between or 'medium,' into which the disembodied soul enters and whose organs of speech it employs."

"Of mediums and the machinery of spiritualism I will not speak, because that is nothing to my purpose," answered Mr. Ringrose. "I am concerned with my own experience alone. There was no medium in my room, or in the passage, or on the window ledge. I have also, I need hardly say, carefully examined the room above mine. It is an attic, the window of which faces away from the front of the house. The ceiling above me is thick and solid. I am, therefore, faced with a problem within a problem—a problem of such unique interest that I shall do my best to solve it. There must be a great deal more happening here than you, or I, imagine. I am convinced that the voice I heard on two different occasions was a human voice—a suffering child's voice. Whether I am right or wrong in that belief, the challenge is equally imperative."

"The voice may be a miracle," suggested Mrs. Bellairs reverently. "It may have been sent for your



ear and only yours. It may be the intention of your Maker, Mr. Ringrose, that the hidden truth shall come to light by your deliberate act."

"It may be," he admitted. "As I told you, my mind is quite open, and I do not pay that absolute homage to reason which many will be found to do. But much must happen before I accept a miracle. I have heard a child's voice—unmistakably a child's voice—lifted in excruciated suffering. And I am unprepared as yet to believe the sounds did not proceed from the throat of a living child. I will not grant that they were subconscious, or unreal, or conveyed to me in any way not capable of explanation. It may appear to you impossible that I should doubt; but, in my wide experience of life, I have been faced with events, at a first glance, as astounding as this. And all were finally explained in a manner agreeable to reason. I will undertake this case, first, because it must challenge any man of decent feeling, and also because it is profoundly interesting in itself. For think what it means. It means, as we see it with our limited present knowledge, that a child, done to death a year ago in my bedroom, has screamed with his natural voice and cried his nightly terrors in my ear, though his body is long since in the grave. Were that so, the stable course of accepted truth is turned upside down: and at present I refuse to believe it. For the rest, I need time to think over the story in all its details. But this I'll tell you, though I'm much afraid, Mrs. Bellairs, you'll hold it another argument for the supernatural side of the situation. I am a retired detective officer. Only my old friend, Jacob Brent, knows it here, and I've sworn him to keep the secret,

and I earnestly beg that you will be scrupulous to do the same. Much may depend on it."

Mrs. Bellairs was deeply moved and signalled to Susan for her salts; while Miss Manley spoke as she brought them.

"If that's not the Lord's hand, what is?" she asked.

Dreading emotion, John Ringrose prepared to take a hasty leave.

"Before all things," he begged, "tell nobody—not Mr. Brent himself—that you have given me this information. I came for a fortnight, but for a fortnight I shall not stop. There are certain things that must not happen. Bitton must neither see me, nor know that I have been here. My name is, unfortunately, familiar in certain circles; but Jacob can be trusted and Miss Manley can be trusted. To-morrow or the next day I shall excuse myself and disappear on unexpected business, promising to return at a later time. Meantime silence; and if I need your help you shall hear from me."

They promised him their prayers, and upon this solemn note he left them, drank and smoked with Brent in the bar for an hour, and then went to bed.

Calm and unperturbed, John Ringrose retired, and his sensations, during some sleepless hours, passed through distinct and natural phases. First he experienced a sense of satisfaction before the tremendous task that he had chosen to appropriate. Its difficulties he left till daylight; for the moment he merely admitted pleasure in the assurance that his career was not quite closed, and that a case without exact parallel now challenged him. An additional content appeared

from the fact that he was about to enter upon it single-handed, without authority behind him. Not one fellow-man was aware of the enterprise. True, two fellow-women were, but he trusted them to preserve silence. Unfettered and unsupported, he would pit himself against the criminals; and he was in the enjoyment of unique advantages, since he must soon know them, while him they would not know. John Ringrose had left the police, and the fact was "news" at the time and had been recorded, together with the mention of a public leave-taking at New Scotland Yard and a presentation from his colleagues. The gold watch that ticked beside him in the darkness had been a gift from Sir James Ridgway himself, the chief commissioner and a man proud to call John his personal friend.

Sleep delayed. Already he itched to be at his desk working out details: but they must be a matter of days, perhaps weeks, for Ringrose employed his own methods and they were never precipitate. Everything depended upon his approach, and perhaps the problem that still interested him far the most deeply was his own nocturnal experience. He judged that might be the last to resolve itself: and yet felt at present no doubt that it would prove capable of resolution. Indignation at a shadow of mental superstition which questioned this conviction roused him effectually, and he exerted his will to dismiss the case from his mind and sleep.

Then, while he lay there in the great silence of a country night, a strange emotion filled his being. The long-drawn agonies of a dead child seemed to flow around him like a chill tide that submerged and

suffocated his soul. Its pulse was not in his head, but his heart ; and it awoke a reaction. Neither dread nor fear adulterated his acute sensibility ; the suffering was pure ; and presently it turned to a very virile torrent of rage and loathing at those responsible for the crime.

He was startled at his own passion. " By God ! " thought John Ringrose, " I've known hate make a crook cleverer than greed, or any of the things that bite us ; but if them, why not me ? Let hate sting my wits till I find the way to hang those dogs, and then I'll retire content ! "

This ambition apparently calmed his nerves and he soon slept.



## CHAPTER V

### THE APPROACH

HIS professional colleagues in the ceaseless struggle against those unsocial members of the community, herded indiscriminately under the title of the "criminal classes," held Ringrose to be a man of action rather than intellect ; but there they wronged him, for his remarkable success on many occasions had been due quite as much to preliminary brainwork as the energy with which he acted upon it. He was, indeed, a subtle man, though his frank and gracious personality did not suggest any such quality. Remarkably handsome, his face, while in one sense an index of his mind, rather concealed than indicated certain curious mental attributes responsible for his fame. There was one little convolution in John's brain for which none gave him credit, and yet to this, in truth, he had owed a position that few men in his business could ever attain. He was but dimly conscious of the gift himself, yet now he knew that such powers as he possessed must be employed to the utmost, if success were to attend his enterprise. He summed up the chances and saw little immediate likelihood of good fortune. There was no hurry and he carefully considered various methods of attack before he decided upon the first step. In no

direct way could this be made ; for much must be learned of the psychology of his subjects before anything direct could be done. Already he perceived that psychology must guide him. Perhaps everything would depend upon the mentality of the pair with whom he was concerned. Their crime indicated no common malefactors.

He felt positive from the outset that he had to do with a man and his master ; and he determined to begin with the man. Lord Brooke he left out of all calculations for the present : there would be no object in approaching the greater until the lesser criminal was measured and understood. And what did he know of him ?

Arthur Bitton had served the present Lord Brooke for many years ; but, soon after the death of the child, had left his employment and was now married and settled at Bridport. He waited occasionally at public and private dinners ; but more than that Ringrose had yet to learn.

He announced next morning after reading his letters, that his holiday had ended untimely.

" I thought I was a free man," he explained to Jacob Brent ; " but you can't live a life like mine and be quite sure when all the stray threads are wound up. This is a business that I feel I must see through ; and it means that my pleasure is cut short for the minute. I'll come back presently, for I find myself very happy at the Old Manor House."

The detective was in London for a week before he arrived at Bridport. Meantime he had learned the address of Arthur Bitton and found that he lived in a small, new bungalow, surrounded by its own little

garden, upon the main great-central thoroughfare, which ran east and west through the town. From Mrs. Bellairs came the exact direction, and Miss Manley had learned it from private study of the Bridport directory.

Ringrose's preparation was ample. Friends he could claim in most ranks of society, and he now spent no little of his time in London with an old butler. He had decided to arrive in Bridport as a gentleman's servant retired, and from his friend he took lessons in this rôle, endeavouring not only to master the duties, but also to enter as far as possible into the mind and see with the angle of vision proper to such a man. He left no channel unexplored by which he could perfect the impersonation, for he was about to act before one who, by the nature of things, must still be suspicious and more or less acutely conscious of the past.

To Bridport came Ringrose under the name of "Alec West," spent a night at an hotel and, during the following day, found lodgings not far distant from the private dwelling-house of Arthur Bitton. He was expansive, genial, and very sure of himself, for a lifetime of experience had proved to John that he could win most people, given time and opportunity. He had only to be himself, for a native graciousness belonged to the man ; he wished well to humanity and was naturally kind-hearted. Moreover, he excelled as a listener, and had perfected the valuable art to win confidence by a tactful interest in others which was not assumed, and which sprang rather from good nature than curiosity. If, as in this case, curiosity inspired him, that incentive remained carefully concealed.

The detective was dressed as a retired man-servant might be supposed to dress—with a propriety and simplicity which appealed to him and chimed with his own ideas of comfort and decorum. He had permitted to grow little side whiskers opposite his ears ; he wore a bowler hat and a thick overcoat ; and he gave it out that he was come to find, if possible, a small house. This fact he imparted to his landlady, and also mentioned after a third visit, at The Crown, a small hotel not far distant from his apartments. It was frequented during the evening by a respectable class of small shopkeepers and other residents of the district, and John gradually became friendly with certain of these strangers and commended himself to Mr. Tinkler, the host of the licensed house. His frank manners, inclination to chat and willingness to listen, opened the door to that freedom of speech usually denied to a stranger ; but he explained one evening that he had retired from a nobleman's service and was now house-hunting ; and he took the chaff directed at his prosperity in good part, permitting the impression to be gained that he was now well-to-do for a man in his position.

"After being a gentleman's gentleman for thirty years," he said, "I can assure you, gentlemen, that it's a very fine thing to be your own man."

And then he heard a name he hoped to hear.

"That's what Mr. Bitton tells us," remarked the landlord—Mr. Simon Tinkler, a tall, angular individual. The detective had already seen Arthur Bitton and he had built on the hope that, after the manner of such a man, he might occasionally spend an hour with friends and acquaintances over a glass. That seemed probable ; it only remained to be learned if he were sociable



and whether, in that case, the nearest inn was his chosen house of refreshment.

Bitton he had observed leave his own garden gate on the third day after his arrival at Bridport. He recognised him instantly from Miss Manley's description. He was of average height and inclined to stoutness. He moved without ostentation and always carried an umbrella. He dressed much as Mr. Ringrose himself, but wore a highly coloured tie. He was clean shaven, with a narrow face, in which were deeply set grey eyes under a high forehead. His hair was scanty and of a pale straw colour. Already he was threatened with baldness and he revealed no eyebrows; but, as the detective perceived on a later occasion, his eyelashes were marked and of the same colour as his hair. His mouth was small and firm. He presented a man inconspicuous and unimportant in every way, and when presently he came to know him, John found that his manners were good.

Mr. Ringrose strolled the town, learned the meaning of its very wide side pavements and, always eager for information, gleaned many interesting particulars of the famous native industry that had here been practised since Elizabethan days. More than one small rope-and-twine merchant took his nightly bowl at The Crown, and the newcomer heard all about the present and past of Bridport.

From single yarn to hawsers that might hold a full-rigged ship, the town met every need of man in this respect. Bridport's cords and twines and nets are still famous the world over; her ropes and cables, cablets and canvas rigged the fleet that scattered the Armada. The wide stone sidewalks told of times when

men and women spun yarn before their doors, and ropewalks ran their silver and amber threads of hemp and flax in mazy reticulations on either side of every street. Steel and steam have banished the industry to outlying factories ; but the broad streets remain, imparting to the town a spacious cheerfulness. The very union workhouse, so Mr. Ringrose observed, faced south and smiled under growing things that would embower it in greenery once more when spring returned. Off Barrack Street it rose, with a hundred windows ; and at the time of the " Terror," when Napoleon threatened, soldiers were quartered there and had given the road its name.

It was not until his fourth evening visit to The Crown that Arthur Bitton joined the company in the bar parlour and bade a courteous good-evening to those who saluted him. He ordered a whisky and sat down beside a friend. He then brought a cigar case from his pocket and presently began to smoke. He was quiet and very unassuming. He listened, but talked little, and, after a second glass, rose and went his way before the rest of the company withdrew. Most servants, as Ringrose knew, have one trained voice and manner reserved for their superiors, while among equals their native speech and habits naturally appear ; but it was impossible to imagine that Bitton could be more considerate and deferential in any company. He was evidently unchanged from the days of service. He suggested a man who felt convinced that everybody, high and low alike, must be his superior. He behaved like a gentleman and revealed the instincts of one. His voice was clear, but low and always modulated. He indicated the possession of intelligence and never

uttered any coarse or offensive word. A wide tolerance marked his opinions and, when he did choose to speak, his neighbours always listened to him. The attitude of tolerance interested Ringrose. He had known a sort of criminal, of the better and educated class, who condoned their own deeds to conscience by declaring a very wide forgiveness for the sins of others.

He made no immediate haste to become acquainted with Mr. Bitton, while improving his acquaintance with other men. Among the regular visitors was a house-agent and, in his company, John saw several houses to be sold, but held out that he did not desire to purchase if it could be avoided. He proclaimed himself, however, as delighted with Bridport and quite determined to find the right dwelling, even though he had to wait a while before doing so.

His first secret aversion, when in the presence of Lord Brooke's retired valet, was soon under control. He experienced sensations at their earliest meeting which, in his recollection, no other criminal had inspired ; and until all such personal antipathy vanished, Mr. Ringrose avoided contact with the man, while pursuing his secret studies of him. But Bitton himself unconsciously assisted to create in his antagonist an impersonal attitude. It was the inner nature of the man that commanded John's deepest consideration, and he longed to probe and measure, analyse and diagnose the temperament capable of frightening a child to death by slow and deliberate stages. He had schooled himself to banish an innate detestation and regard Arthur Bitton with no more emotion than he might have displayed at sudden sight

of a poisonous snake, before he allowed himself to become acquainted.

Then very slowly, and at considerable intervals of time, he crept closer. First he wished him good-evening occasionally, or bade him good-night, when he left the bar parlour. Then, he agreed with certain of Bitton's sentiments and anon invited him to join his other new friends in a drink, when he stood around. Each step was taken with deliberation and no display of anything but conventional good bar manners. Bitton usually dropped in about three nights a week, and Ringrose was often at pains not to appear himself on nights when the other might be expected to call. This course he pursued for two reasons ; that neither Bitton nor anybody else might suspect that he felt a shadow of personal interest in the retired valet ; and because he wanted some of the things he had said to Mr. Tinkler and his clients to get round to Bitton's ears. They would not speak of " Alec West " in his own presence, but might be expected to do so when he was absent, for he knew that he had created a favourable impression and was welcome in the gathering. He had interested them and often amused them—not with his real experiences of life ; but with various tales gleaned from his old butler friend. There is surely no man living better qualified to provide entertainment for the middle classes than a shrewd and intelligent butler who has spent thirty years with the " upper ten " ; and Mr. Ringrose lived up to this ideal.

Thus he paved the way. The element of time did not enter into his calculations. Time was no object ; but a vital necessity must lie in winning



the unsuspecting confidence of his subject, if that were in the power of any fellow creature.

Events fell out as he had planned, and there came a night when Arthur Bitton himself approached John Ringrose. He had heard all about him behind his back and awakened to interest in him. But his early gestures were of a hesitating and tentative character, and the newcomer proved in no hurry to declare friendship. It was some time before he revealed any regard for Mr. Bitton; indeed, the valet began to retreat somewhat before John showed an inclination to come forward. Bitton was conscious of a personality stronger than his own; but the disarming goodwill of the stranger and his readiness to heed those who might seek him in conversation encouraged the lesser man. He felt glad, therefore, when John, for the first time, revealed an inclination to become more confidential.

They left The Crown together on a day after Christmas, and Bitton spoke.

"I hear," he said, "that you and I was in the same walk of life, Mr. West."

"So we were, and a very interesting walk, too, as no doubt you found it. Half the battle is to get along with the right people, and half the luck is for them to drop out when you want them to. I was very fortunate in both respects. I followed my father in the family of the Mactaggerts—Scots folk. And you might have seen in the papers six months ago that The Mactaggert—that's the title, you see—'The Mactaggert'—well, he died as a pretty old man, and, between ourselves, he left me a good bit over and above the legacy we generally look for. But he was mighty rich and he

had a great regard for me, and I would have died for the old hero if need be. A rare good sort—a soldier he was, and shone in the Boer War.”

Arthur Bitton listened to these facts, and guessing that he read society news, as his class is accustomed to do, the speaker had not invented his master but abstracted him from obituary notices of the previous summer.

His frankness won no immediate response, for Bitton proved not garrulous or communicative; but neither did he appear to be secretive, and in any case he knew that his story was familiar in essential details among the regular visitors to The Crown.

On a later occasion he told it to Ringrose.

“You might wonder why I didn’t stop with his lordship, when he came into his titles and big money; but, to tell the truth, I was a bit tired of it,” explained Bitton. “I’d served him very well in Italy, though he was a bit of a taskmaster, and sometimes I had to wait for my money.”

“I shouldn’t have liked that.”

“I didn’t; but he had a way with him, and I knew he’d let me have it when he could. A man with a ’obby is different from other men. He’d beg, borrow, or steal for his ’obby; and though I never saw anything to it, you know how it is with them. Often, with all the world to choose from, they’ll fasten on some idea that, to us, looks rank foolishness, and they’ll let everything else go and just put all their time and cash and thought and wits into something that you, or me, wouldn’t think twice about.”

“They do,” admitted Ringrose. “They look at life different. The need for fighting life as we feel

it never comes to them. They've got security from the cradle and all they need to think upon is their own pleasure. And it takes shapes according to the natural bent of mind. Some will do their duty as they see it, and serve their country and go into the services, or take a hand in government—the ambitious sort, that is. But most run after their fun, and this one will go for cattle breeding, and this for horse-racing, and another for travel, or a yacht, and another for horticulture, and another for art, and another, very like, won't soar above postage-stamps and give his life and his money for getting the best collection in the world."

Arthur Bitton nodded.

"That's right, West," he said. "They'll work up a proper passion for trifles, and that's what his lordship did. Lord Brooke was a collector—and what did he collect? Carved morsels of ivory! Not big statues or anything of that, to make a show; but ivory—ancient carved ivory from the Middle Ages; and he's the greatest man in the world on that little subject, so I'm told."

John laughed.

"A harmless craze," he said.

"I left him much against his will," continued Bitton, "but he'd run me all over Europe and I was very wishful to get married and settle. I want for you to meet Mrs. Bitton. She comes from Brooke-Norton, and her people used to work for the family."

"I'd be very proud to do so, Bitton," declared his new friend, glad of the invitation.

Thus, little by little, the men became acquainted, and Ringrose's power of ingratiating had its inevitable reward. He acted well, and better knowledge of the

retired valet convinced him that Bitton had never been anything but a tool in stronger hands. He learned gradually more particulars of Arthur's master, and saw a being ingenious, resourceful, energetic, amiable when unopposed, and indifferent concerning the means by which he reached his purpose. Lord Brooke, it seemed, was a man of one idea, and he possessed those dynamic powers that such a man generally reveals. He had spent much money on his collection; he had always been pressed for cash, and occasionally he had vanished from his villa at Florence, taking Bitton with him and hiding from his creditors until supplies relieved the strain. His brother generally came to the rescue, for he, so Bitton reported, had been a very wealthy man of simple tastes, and generous. Now the great family revenues were enjoyed by the reigning baron, and Mr. Bitton doubted not that Lord Brooke's store of mediæval ivories increased rapidly. His lordship was unmarried, nor would he ever marry, in the retired valet's opinion.

Arthur Bitton's manner under familiar acquaintance did not change. He was never furtive and did not suggest one who harboured any secrets that made him fear the world; but he was always reserved and colourless. He proved, also, to be close-fisted, and where money was concerned, had nothing to tell. Ringrose later learned his means, circuitously, through his wife. Arthur enjoyed an income of five hundred a year, which came to him through dividends. He therefore owned something in the nature of ten thousand pounds—much what the detective had expected to find.

Mr. Ringrose in due course made the acquaintance of Mrs. Jane Bitton, and found her ten years younger



than her husband, a quiet, pleasant woman, plain of face and practical of mind. From her, on an occasion of meeting her at her morning shopping and carrying a large parcel for her, he learned that her father kept a public house at Brooke-Norton, while her brother worked for the lord of the manor.

The friendship grew. Ringrose supped more than once at Bitton's bungalow, and more than once Bitton supped with him. Then John would drop in for a pipe and a glass sometimes ; while to him, for the same evening entertainment, would Arthur occasionally come.

The time was ripe for action, but, before taking it, John left Bridport for a week, that he might view houses at Axminster, not far distant. He declared himself still unable to find just the place he needed, and made this excursion on the pretence of seeking farther afield for an ideal home. But what he desired was a few days of private reflection wherein to mature the future course of events.

Arthur Bitton had now become to him merely a case. He loathed the man, and he would have loathed any other man with Bitton's secret record behind him ; but, while he suffered no personal animosity to tone his inspiration, he allowed no feeling of humanity or his native goodwill to influence it. When sometimes the awful deed he was now minded to do cried against John's own heart, his head spoke ; and again he heard a child's voice screaming for mercy.

His purpose remained unchanged after study of his subject. It was to break Bitton, strip him naked, reduce him to a condition of moral ruin, where he would recognise himself in a situation with all defences down.

Ringrose had detected in their intimate discourse no cloud over the valet's past and no indication that any shadow of remorse ever tinctured his mind. Bitton, indeed, preserved a strict attention to all conventional details of good behaviour. He went to church with his wife once, and sometimes twice, on Sundays. His attitude to life was serious ; he never jested upon grave subjects ; indeed, he never jested at all. He was strict in his own life, if his word could be relied upon, and his code allowed of no irregularities, while, at the same time, he manifested a large charity with his neighbours and appeared to judge none. He declared the peace of his own home very agreeable to him, and showed not the least evidence that any dark memory lessened his content.

None the less, from his own knowledge and observation, Ringrose suspected that the terrible action he now contemplated must lead to the results he desired. Indeed, there was no other way. He had to do with a creature hard as flint under his mild and self-contained exterior. This man, so temperate and restrained in his life and opinions, had murdered a child ; and there were features about the physical side of Mr. Bitton to convince John that a child was the only thing he would have had the courage to murder. The fact, no doubt, made what his unknown adversary was about to do the more appalling ; yet Ringrose did not shrink from it.

By way of terror must his object be gained ; but it was not until he had exhausted every other possibility that he arrived at a determination so horrible.

## CHAPTER VI

### BEHIND THE ARMCHAIR

JOHN RINGROSE remembered that he must think of himself as well as his victim. He might fail in the experiment he proposed to make and he considered the consequences of failure ; but in pursuing this inquiry, a strange experience overtook himself. He had never much relied upon intuition in his business, for on various occasions within his knowledge very strong intuitions had resulted in serious errors of judgment. Intuition, in truth, John rated as a valuable auxiliary combined with facts, but no more to be trusted completely under any circumstances than reason itself. Yet, for once, intuition spoke with no uncertain voice and he felt positively assured that the thing he designed to do was both the right thing and the only thing to bring him face to face with the soul of Arthur Bitton. What would follow he had also considered. He judged that by turning King's evidence, Bitton might save himself. Indeed, John doubted, even if he achieved his purpose, whether the man or his master would get a capital sentence. That they had been on close terms of intimacy and understanding, and that the valet had connived in many a transaction he now condemned, Ringrose did not doubt ; for not until he

knew his man to the depths could the master have taken Bitton into confidence over such an infamy. Of Lord Brooke, however, he as yet thought but little. Once he had wondered whether the bad conscience he designed to stimulate in Bitton would take him hotfoot to his old employer, who might be assumed a spirit of tougher nature than his tool ; but John dismissed this possibility. His plan was such that not to Lord Brooke would Bitton divulge the experience awaiting him.

"It's a thing," thought Ringrose, "that a man would only take to his God ; and what's your fix if you've got no God ? For a God he cannot have, despite his psalm-singing, else he'd never have done what he did."

The detective returned to his temporary dwelling in Bridport in ten days and was welcomed by his new friends.

"Very glad to see you, for that means you haven't found anything to suit you at Axminster," said Mr. Tinkler on the evening when John reappeared at The Crown.

"Mischief take the houses ! " he answered. " Looks as if I'd have to build one for myself—a bungalow, maybe, like Arthur Bitton's."

The retired valet appeared well pleased to see him and the former friendly relations were resumed. Then came an evening when Bitton visited Ringrose and they talked together as usual. John had elaborated his pretence of building and, on this occasion, he made a request to the other.

"Would it put you out a lot, or your missis, if some morning at her convenience I took a look around your house ? " he asked. " I've very nearly made up my



mind to build one like it. So far as I can judge it might suit a single man very nicely, if not too large ; and when I can find a site, I'd go into my capital, up to five or six hundred pounds, and build such another."

"Of course," replied Bitton. "You're welcome. I'll tell the wife you'd like to look round. It cost seven hundred and, what with extras after, and the garden, and so on, you may say it ran us into near a thousand. It's Mrs. Bitton's house."

The detective thanked him and they fell into their usual easy talk. The night was rough and dark and a February day had sunk in storm. A gale blew from the south and, in their silences, they heard the roar of the great naked woods that lay half a mile distant between Bridport and the sea. The wind shouted gustily, rain beat on the window panes and, now and then, a puff of smoke was driven back down the chimney to billow into the room.

"A whole gale," said Ringrose. "I wouldn't be in the Channel to-night, Arthur."

"Nor me, Alec. I hate the sea, best of times. I voyaged now and again with his lordship. He didn't care whether 'twas oceans or mountains that stood between him and one of his toys. He'd hunt Europe and the East for 'em."

"I admire such a will as that, though you could wish strong men would put their courage and determination to better purpose than collecting trifles. If your late master had been ambitious to serve the State, or do big things, no doubt, with such a power of purpose, he'd have shone."

"He would for certain. He'd let nothing come between him and what he wanted. Kind and easy in

most things and the last to crave for publicity, or take responsibility ; but just as hard as steel where his passion for the carved ivories was roused. A very queer sort of man, and risks were nothing to him. The trouble was always cash. He had no head for figures—hated 'em—wanted every stiver for his collection and thought he could live on air," said Bitton. " He'd swear and give me and his lodge-keeper and housekeeper hell when we fetched along the bills."

They talked, and during a momentary silence a gust of the storm moaned in the window.

" Bless the wind," cried John. " It's like a lost child screaming." And then, without a pause, he continued. " What you tell me is very interesting, Arthur, because I've always felt a good bit drawn to the study of human nature, and this I've felt before all else, that such as yield themselves up, body and soul, to one thing, and one only, are wrong. It ain't wholesome. It gives you a crooked view of life and makes you unsocial and no good to your fellow creatures. And to be no good to your fellow creatures shows that something's the matter with you. It's a test, in my opinion, and if you're useless all round, then you can't have a good conscience. That's the worst of all to overtake a man—a bad conscience. I'd sacrifice almost anything myself before I'd sacrifice a clean conscience."

" So would I, Alec ; so would I, indeed," responded the other earnestly.

And then, while Ringrose still uttered platitudes, the thing happened, and into a room empty save for themselves it seemed that another being entered. But it was not a human being.

The detective had taken his apartments in a little

Queen Anne dwelling which faced south off Bridport's main road, and his sitting-room opened with a bow window into a small garden. The roof of this chamber was low, but the room itself not very small.

The men sat in armchairs beside the fire, which had now sunk low, and they were lighted by a lamp on a table between them. Draped with a green shade, the lamp rays only cast a comparatively narrow radius of light, which took in their chairs, their heads and shoulders, a circle of the carpet, the hearth and the table with whisky and glasses upon it. The rest of the room was dark. Behind Arthur Bitton stood the window, with its curtains drawn; to the rear of an armchair, in which John Ringrose sat, was a wide interval of gloom, while beyond it, against the wall, stood a tall and handsome old Sheraton bookcase, stocked with many volumes, and much out of repair. To the left of the visitor and the right of his host, where they faced each other, was a dining-table from which John ate his meals; and behind that opened the door.

The clock had just struck eleven, and Bitton was about to rise and take his leave when he became conscious of something moving behind the other man's chair. The outline of a red, conspicuous object crept into the light at Ringrose's shoulder, and a thing lifted its head over the chair and looked steadily at Bitton. The creature's skull was the size of a large coconut, and from a low brow sprang scrub and scarlet hair. Nose it had none, but beneath two pits that took its place there gaped lips; and the mouth opened and shut silently, revealing dog-like fangs that glittered. Its yellow eyes also shone with life, and the head moved on an invisible neck.

Not Salvator Rosa, nor Edgar Poe from his ghoul-haunted woodlands, ever conjured a monster more loathsome, or compact of vileness. It was as though some hugely magnified insect, or submarine creature, created for another world than this, had been blown by the storm into that peaceful, human company.

“ Given a clean mind—a mind at rest, Arthur——”

Ringrose broke off before a very remarkable spectacle. The man before him had entirely changed—changed physically. In one moment, as though some transforming bolt had wrought the metamorphosis, he shrank, wilted and collapsed in his chair. His head and body actually appeared to have grown smaller, as though driven in upon themselves and crushed by invisible forces liberated upon him from every direction. He was convulsed, and unconsciously one hand clutched hard at the pit of his stomach, as though the blow had fallen with its most terrific impact there. Upon his face was written the sign manual of terror ; all-conquering and destructive fear swept his countenance and set its distorting stamp on every feature. His withered straw-coloured hair stood up, as though drawn by an electric magnet ; the blood had fled from his skin to his heart, and his brow and cheeks and lips were marble white. Sweat sprang and ran down his forehead, and his eyelids had opened so widely that a circle of eyeball surrounded the iris. His jaw had fallen, and now he opened and shut his mouth mechanically at the thing which opened and shut its jaws at him. One of Bitton’s hands was stretched suddenly towards it, and his fingers shook in a palsy. Then a word broke from his lips—one word that exploded on a single, high, frenzied note.



"Christ!" screamed Mr. Bitton.

Ringrose had already sprung to his feet in deep concern.

"My dear fellow—what——"

"Look behind you! Oh, my God!"

Two hands now fastened on John's arm like a vice, and he felt the breath of the sufferer beat in gusts upon his cheek.

"Look—look—keep it away! Don't let it see me! Get between—get between!"

"Steady, man—steady!" cried John, lifting his voice. "Keep your nerve. What in the name of thunder's the matter?"

Bitton pointed; then he collapsed into the big saddle-back chair on which he sat, drew up his knees and hid his face behind his hands.

"Speak!" urged the other. "For mercy's sake, Arthur, tell me what you've seen!"

With an effort the stricken man looked up—to mark that familiar phantom—now endowed with life—still moving and gibbering at him. Then he covered his face again.

"Oh, my God! Behind your chair! Where's your eyes?"

Ringrose stared at the monster and approached it until their faces were within a foot of each other. Only amazement sat on his.

"There's nothing there, old man!" he said. "Pull yourself together and tell me what you think you saw."

Even as he spoke the vision disappeared, as though John's unshaken voice could exorcise it. The creature had gone, and where it had broken the gloom behind

it, all was dark and empty again. Once more Bitton cast a glance, while Ringrose stood over him and spoke comfortable words. Arthur now perceived only emptiness, and he struggled to regain self-control. But it was some minutes before he could do so, and while he returned to his senses, fumbled for a handkerchief, shuddered and shivered in every limb and wiped his streaming face, the other continued to reassure him and made him drink a glass half full of whisky.

"Get it down," he said. "Good Lord, Arthur, if I didn't know you, I should say you'd had too much already! Something's knocked the stuffing out of you, sure enough. What the devil did you think you saw?"

But Bitton would not speak as yet. He only shook his head and drank with his teeth rattling on the glass. Ringrose, leaving him to himself, lighted a candle and explored the room. He poked into each corner, opened an old chest which contained some tattered music, examined the bookcase and peered behind the curtains. A ruined piano stood across one angle of the room, and in his exploration of it John struck a husky note, whose wire throbbled with a sudden sound. Then Bitton spoke in a voice still badly shaken and out of control.

"Drop it, Alec. I'm all right now. You won't find nothing. There's nothing there. It was the light played a trick, or the storm got on my nerves. I never can abide rough weather. Come a bit closer. It's time I was home."

Ringrose rejoined him.

"There's nought to fright a mouse in this old room. Must have been the light or some trick of the mind.

People do see things that ain't there. I'm not one to flout ghosts myself, though so far I never met such a creature. I've lived in houses with 'em, however, and others saw 'em. There may be one here. You never know. Tell me about it. That'll calm you quicker than anything. Did it look like anybody you ever met—man or woman?"

The other shook his head.

"No, no—nobody. It weren't a human face—a bit of light and shade or something. Ugly—ugly as hell. I'll forget it, Alec. I don't want to call it back even to my mind."

"Be sure it was only in your mind—indigestion, very like. You can have waking nightmares as well as sleeping ones. I knew a man who saw—— However, no need for any more of that. Drink up and think no more about it. Can you stand firm again? You're cold through, I fear, but it's hardly worth while to make up the fire. You get to your bed, Arthur, and you'll be all right by morning."

Mr. Bitton rose on his feet at last. Then he lifted a petition.

"You'll say I'm a fool, and so I am; but my nerves have gone back a good bit on me to-night. D'you think you could see me home? I'm not afraid or anything like that; but I'm none too sure my legs will carry me without an arm to help. I might fall down."

"Certainly I'll come," answered Ringrose. "It's my duty. Shall we look up a doctor?"

"No, no; I'm all right now—only shock. A nasty shock to fall on a man. I'm ashamed to ask you to come out, all the same. Such a wicked night, too."

"Weather's nothing to me. I like the elements when they are raging," declared John. "To be swept like a leaf before a whole gale, or see a storm from mid-Atlantic—such things are good to me, Arthur. They learn you that there are bigger forces hidden in nature than we know about."

He put on his coat and helped Bitton into a waterproof. Then, taking the other's arm, Mr. Ringrose marched him home and delivered him into the care of his wife. He had been warned to say as little as possible.

"Arthur's not very well," he explained. "A touch of faintness came over him, so I made bold to see him safely back. Get him to bed and put a hot-water bottle to his feet, ma'am. No, I won't come in."

He was gone into the black buffet of the storm; but the wrath of nature failed to impress John as he drove before it homeward. One absorbing reflection occupied his mind.

"The old ladies were right enough, as I felt them to be," he thought. "He knew that beastly monster only too well; and he won't want many doses of it, either."

Another recollection deeply impressed him.

"He called on me to hide him from it! And many a time did that dead child cry to him to do the same."

John Ringrose told himself that he must keep the last dreadful fact very firmly in his mind. "If I don't," he reflected, "I shall yield before he does."

For now he realised the hateful nature of his task, and something of the terror that he had planned for another touched his own soul in the storm. To look upon a tortured creature and know his agony is



inflicted at your will—that must be a harsh ordeal for any honest man.

“What’s this vile business going to do to *me*?” John asked himself.

He threw off his dripping coat presently; and when he went to his rest, a box accompanied him. It was hidden under his bed before he slept.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE SHERATON BOOKCASE

SHORTLY before noon on the following day, Ringrose called to learn how Bitton fared. The storm had blown itself out, the sky was nearly clear, and the morning shone with the low, pale, golden sunlight of winter.

Arthur himself answered the detective's knock. He was in his shirt sleeves and wore carpet slippers. He looked pale and had a bandage bound over one eye.

The man proved full of apologies.

"I'm ashamed to look' at you," he said. " You'll turn me down for a slack-twisted fool I should think, or even a drunkard. I led you a proper dance last night, I'm afraid."

"No matter for that so long as you're all right. What's wrong with your eye?"

"Come in half a minute."

Ringrose followed him to a little kitchen whose window opened on a vegetable garden behind it.

"I thought a bit about you last night," began John, "and first I thought, as you say, you might be fond of a drop out of sight of your neighbours. A secret drinker sometimes gives himself away like that. But I've seen 'em in higher stations than ours, Arthur,

and I know the signs. There's none about you. And then I wondered if your eyes were all right. And by the look of that bandage they are not."

"Exactly what it was I was fearing," answered the other. He was cool and calm and had evidently quite recovered from his shock.

"Last night, when I got to bed," he continued, "I felt no ill effects from that ugly jar, and laughed at myself; then a cruel, sharp pain in my left eye came on me, like a stab. It kept me awake two hours or more, and then went off; but the eye don't look right to me, and I'm rather frightened about it."

"You can't have it attended to too soon, then. You go to an oculist this very afternoon," urged the other.

"There's none here I'd trust. But, as you say, a man mustn't play about with his eyes. Mrs. Bitton's going to take me to London to-morrow."

For a moment suspicions awoke in the mind of Ringrose. Was it possible the man meant a hurried departure and disappearance? But he did not find this fear grow. Bitton was taking precautions to explain his collapse of the previous night. Arthur might be expected to do so. He would probably act as he intended, learn there was nothing amiss with his sight and return home.

Upon the whole John was not sorry that his victim had made so complete a recovery. Time must elapse before the second application, and he had not yet determined when and how it would be administered. He judged that three would be sufficient.

Arthur's wife returned while still they talked, and for the moment she showed more concern than

her husband. She was curious, and John found that Bitton had merely confessed to seeing something that was not there. She now questioned Ringrose closely as to the incident. But he had no particulars to add.

"I had a close look by daylight this morning," he said. "I thought, perhaps, there was some china ornament somewhere, or a funny face in a picture, or some such thing that might have caught the light and shown up to startle Arthur; but no—nothing of the kind. I expect it's what they call an optical illusion, Mrs. Bitton; and that, in his case, means eyes and no more. Don't neither of you fret about it; but go and consult a tip-top eye doctor. Then he'll soon be all right."

Jane Bitton remembered that their new friend had expressed a wish to see the house; and now she invited him to do so. It was all on one floor, and John admired it considerably, praised the size of the rooms and wished himself in such another.

"I couldn't run to anything so spacious," he said; "but the plan is fine, and I might manage something like it on a smaller scale, I dare say."

After returning home, while the matter was still in his mind, he made a plan of the dwelling; and when on the following morning, the Bittons started for London, he saw them off.

In two days they returned with satisfactory news. The oculist could find no explanation for Arthur's alarm and reported his eyesight unusually good for a man of his age. Some strain, or possibly a blow he had received and forgotten, might have accounted for the passing pain; but there was nothing whatever the matter.



Bitton came back in good spirits and proceeded with the ordinary course of his days. He grew more friendly and sociable; but, guessing that he would probably shy at spending an evening with him for some while, Ringrose offered no invitation to do so. For a fortnight he waited and, meanwhile, with the lengthening days of spring, Bitton began his walks again and invited John to accompany him.

"It keeps down the fat and makes you hard," he said. "There's a nice pub up upon the hills by the name of the Old Manor House, and I take a cup of tea there sometimes."

John, however, had no intention of visiting Mr. Brent's hostelry. He declared himself a poor walker, and presently, on the plea of a birthday, invited Arthur and his wife to supper.

Bitton at first refused, but two days later accepted, and the trio passed a pleasant evening together. John had been at pains to prepare an excellent entertainment, and he had lighted his room so cheerfully that not a dark corner remained in it. They drew to the fire afterward, but Arthur avoided the arm-chair of his torment. Jane Bitton sat in it, and her husband, with his face to the grate, occupied a seat between his wife and their host.

The evening passed off very pleasantly, and Lord Brooke's old valet expanded as he had not done before. He told stories, to cap those of Mr. Ringrose, and added a little to the latter's knowledge of his late master.

"I thought sometimes he properly enjoyed being threatened with the bailiffs," declared Arthur. "He'd leave it till the last moment and then bolt off under

cover of night and get to his brother by hook or crook. His late lordship spent a lot of time in Italy, too—he had a villa on the Lake of Como—and my master would slip off and get to him and knock the money out of him, on all sorts of threats that he'd be locked up and disgrace the family if he didn't get it. But he always did get it. Born to outrun the constable, that man. I often wonder how long he'll stop at Brooke-Norton."

"Not married, you told me?"

"Not he. No use for the women. My wife, who's a Brooke-Norton native, tells me that he has a man to stop with him now and then, but only maniacs like himself. He'll let the shooting down and grudge a new roof to a farm presently, if the money gets short."

"And his brother—was he all for art and such like?"

"No; his brother was an open-air man. Golf and riding and sport. He came home for autumn most years, till his wife died in Italy."

"No children, I suppose, as his brother inherited?"

"Ah, that's a sad story," answered Mr. Bitton thoughtfully. "A son he had—weak witted. The little boy died a year or more after his father. And there was one daughter also—older than the boy. She lives with her uncle."

"I saw her out with him in a motor-car last time I went over," said Jane. "A pale girl, but mighty pretty."

"The boy was a good-looking child also; the father—Lord Rupert—was a big, handsome chap—would have made two of my master. But he

always looked upon his brother as a boy and forgave him his silly ways."

Ringrose observed that his guest, while stating the facts of the child's death, exercised considerable reserve with respect to details. But the detective revealed no special interest in the affairs of the family, and presently he spread a plan before Mrs. Bitton and invited her to applaud it. An architect had drawn a design for the imaginary bungalow under John's direction. Such detail was typical of him.

"You'll find yourself wanting a spare room, however," prophesied Jane. "Everybody wants a spare room, soon or late."

"Not me, ma'am. I'm the loneliest chap on earth. Not so much as a niece or nephew to pay me a visit."

"No relations is a state that has got its bright side as well as its dark, Alec," the other man assured him.

The evening passed, and a week later John visited the Bittons. He found himself rather liking Jane. She could not be called attractive and her manners were abrupt, but she proved sincere and straightforward. Thrift was her favourite theme. She loved devices for saving the pennies, and Arthur applauded her. John Ringrose was convinced that no shadow of the truth had ever entered Mrs. Bitton's head. She was not the woman to have condoned a crime—least of all such a crime as her husband had committed. She professed a fondness for children; but had no desire to possess any of her own. Her husband shared her sentiments and Ringrose applauded them.

Arthur never returned to the subject of his fright, nor did John; and at length, on an occasion when his wife was going with another woman to the theatre,

Bitton consented to spend an hour alone with his new friend before he fetched her home. He appeared uneasy and his mind wandered, while the other knew well enough what occupied Arthur's thoughts; but Mr. Ringrose did not touch the subject and cast his own ideas in pleasant channels. He welcomed the approach of spring and he was full of a book which he had discovered in the library of his landlady.

"You must read it when I'm through," he said. "There's little enough on her bookshelf to waste your time with. Sermons mostly. I didn't know there were so many sermons printed in the world. But her husband was a minister and that accounts for it. The book I'm reading is *Gulliver's Travels*—by a clergyman, too, apparently; but it doesn't much smack of the pulpit. You'd die of laughing—such a man for a bit of fun as you. It all means something—a satirical affair aimed at the follies of those days, which are much like the follies of these for that matter; but the fun is in the adventures of the hero. And the reverend gentleman doesn't mince words, neither. Mighty near the wind he sails. The wonder is the book's allowed."

Mr. Bitton's reading had not embraced *Gulliver's Travels*, but he decided that it should do so.

Nothing happened that night; then came a second occasion when, with gathering courage, Arthur stopped until eleven o'clock beside John's fireside. They had conversed as before, and their relations now approached intimacy, for the detective never played a part long without elaborating it. He was now a retired manservant in every visible particular—spoke and even thought like one. Sometimes, in private, he almost believed his own elaborate fiction. He had sketched



his life in detail, declared his means and indicated his tastes.

As the clock struck eleven on this occasion, Arthur rose and knocked the ashes from his pipe. The night was still and a bright moon shone over the meadows and woods where they stretched glimmering with the first touch of spring.

"I found a primrose in Lover's Lane to-day," said John.

"Primrose be damned," answered Bitton. "What about *Gulliver's Travels*? Are you through with it yet?"

"How did you know I'd been reading *Gulliver's Travels*?" asked John, indicating complete loss of memory in his blank stare.

"Didn't you tell me you were, and didn't you say it was a bit thick?"

"It's more than thick. I've finished with it. Don't you read it, Arthur."

But Mr. Bitton was resolved to read it.

"I'll take it now," he said. "Your landlady won't mind. Mrs. Grey's very friendly with my wife."

John made no verbal reply for a moment. Then he shrugged his shoulders and pointed to the bookcase. Had Bitton not named the book, he himself might have done so; but John had a theory that it was well a criminal should do the detective's work for him, when possible.

"If you will, you will; but if Mrs. Bitton dips into it, as like as not she'll fling it over the fence. The big book, with gold lettering, on the top shelf but one."

Mr. Ringrose removed the lamp shade and cast a steadfast beam on a beautiful but battered bit of

Sheraton; while Arthur, opening the glass door, peered for the book and saw it.

"Mother Grey would have a fit—eh?" he laughed, and then pulled out *Gulliver's Travels*.

But something instantly followed.

As Bitton withdrew the book, from behind it followed a bodiless head with glaring eyes and gibbering mouth. Arthur reeled back as though shot, uttered one inarticulate sound and fell. Nor did he make any effort to rise. The other sprang to him and found him quite unconscious. This time Ringrose had deprived his victim of all sense, and now he set to work, without haste, to revive him. The fall had caused Bitton no injury, but it was five minutes before he came to himself and found a cushion beneath his head and John kneeling beside him with a glass of spirits.

"Lie still, Arthur; lie still for a bit," he said. "I'm terrible afraid, old man, you've had a stroke, or some such thing."

"Keep it away; keep it away," groaned the sufferer, who only opened his eyes to shut them again.

"Keep what away? Good Lord, man, there's nothing here. Drink—take down the lot. Your heart's had a jar, I'm fearing."

The sufferer gulped his liquor, and bidding him on no account to move, Ringrose went for more. Bitton was groaning.

"And what was it all about?" asked the other. "Surely you didn't see nothing again, did you?"

"That cursed head—that head it was—right on top of me, Alec."

"Then it's pure imagination, Arthur—just a trick of your brain."

"I saw it—I'll swear to God it was there. I—I—heard its teeth."

"When, then—where was it? Didn't I stand at your elbow? How the mischief could it be there and me not see it?"

"Behind the book. When I fetched down the book—it was there. It came out—it came out at me."

Ringrose looked up at the open bookcase.

"You never fetched down the book," he said calmly. "There's the book in its place. You lifted your hand and then you just gave a bit of a groan and down you dropped."

The other forgot his terror for a moment.

"Didn't fetch down the book? It—it was behind the book, I tell you."

"Nonsense, my dear fellow! Pull yourself together. Watch me, now, and speak if you see it again."

Despite the other's protests Ringrose marched to the bookcase and pulled *Gulliver's Travels* boldly from its place. Only a hole gaped behind and he thrust his hand into it.

"There—see for yourself. There's nothing there, or could be. There's a bee in your bonnet. Come back to the fire. You can move now."

He helped Bitton to the fire.

"I'm none too sure if you ought to walk home to-night," he said.

But Arthur was recovering and John strove to help him do so.

"This is a terribly interesting thing to me, Arthur," he declared, "and I'm none too comfortable about it. Is there second sight, or any mystery like that, in your family? I believe in second sight, and I know

there are people who see things that everyday folk do not. If there was an evil spirit or any such thing hid in this room, that your eyes can see, and mine can't see, then, even though it's hidden from me, I shouldn't stop in this house. I hate weird, uncanny rooms."

The other breathed hard and held his hands to the fire. He was still shaking and fearful, and found it hard to speak. A hunted, hopeless look sat in his face.

"I wish you could tell me what it was you did see? Not a dead relation, or a relation in foreign parts, or anybody like that?"

Arthur shook his head.

"It's not a human face," he said.

"A monkey, then, or some freak?"

"No. I can't describe it—just a horrible grinning sort of a—devil."

"Was it the same horror as you saw the first time?"

"Yes."

"Then I clear out of here," declared John. "You've got the second sight, I expect; and if there's some bad influence here—if a supernatural thing—not even a human ghost—haunts this room, though I've never seen it, I might do, and it's not good enough. I shall leave to-morrow, Arthur."

The other looked at him helplessly but did not speak. He was still unnerved by his own thoughts.

"I'll find a couple of rooms in Bridport if I can," continued Mr. Ringrose, "or else put up with Mr. Tinkler, very likely. I don't care about this, and I won't have you come into this room again. You see your doctor to-morrow and get some tonic, or something. Would you like me to fetch a doctor now?"



Perhaps you'll tell him more than you feel you can tell me?"

But the other shook his head. He was making a great effort to get his nerves under control.

"No, no—a doctor couldn't do anything for me. I'll see one to-morrow and get some bromide. Bromide is what I want. I don't believe I've got second sight."

He drank again, but though he had taken enough to intoxicate him, Mr. Bitton was quite clear in his mind.

"Now I'll get going," he said.

"If you're sure you can. I'll see you home. You'll be all right out of this room, Arthur. And I'll be out of it to-morrow. You've seen an evil spirit—that's what you've seen; and it's not good enough."

"Don't you tell Mrs. Grey."

"Certainly not. I'll just say I want a change. No good frightening the poor woman. She's never seen it, I expect."

Then the other spoke. He was weak and for a moment caution failed him.

"Nobody's ever seen it but me," he said.

In half an hour Bitton stood at his own front door. The night air braced him; but John observed that he shrank from the moonlight, held his arm tightly and kept his eyes for the most part shut. He was still deathly pale, but his physical strength had returned.

As they parted Arthur made a request.

"I can carry on now, all right," he declared, "and I'm not going to tell Jane this time. I don't want her to think I'm a ghost seer or anything like that. I'll be all right to-morrow. She'll think I've had a drop

too much—that's all. Let her. I'll keep shut about it and you do the same."

John promised; then he asked one question.

"And you never saw any such thing as this horror in real life, Arthur? It don't call back any adventure of the past?"

For a moment he thought Bitton was going to collapse again; but, with a tremendous effort, he maintained his composure and replied:

"Good God, no! Never was such a thing on earth. There ain't such a thing really."

"Then it's that room," vowed the detective. "Some fearful deed has been done in that room very like, and I'm out of it to-morrow. And you keep smiling, Arthur. You bet your life you'll never see it again."

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE LAST TIME

HIS own thoughts slowed his footsteps as Ringrose strolled back through the peaceful night. He considered every incident resulting from the second application of his torment. The effect had been more severe, but the reaction quicker. His own pretended alarm was a performance destined to keep himself out of any calculations Bitton might presently make, when he, too, considered this experience. It must dispel any suspicion of Ringrose himself in the other man's mind, for none could know better than the victim that his adventures had nothing to do with John's apartment. The detective, however, never denied himself trouble, or evaded any details destined to strengthen his position. By sharing Bitton's dread, he escaped the risk of forfeiting his confidence.

On the occasion of this second experiment John found himself personally unmoved. His hatred of the man steeled him to proceed, and he anticipated the following day with some anxiety, for Arthur's condition would probably determine his future actions. He desired no more than one further scene of torture; but it would need to be severe and, as yet, he had not planned the details. They must depend on developments of which he remained at present in ignorance.

Bitton was not visible on the following day and, after he had taken his tea, Ringrose went to see him. But as he lifted his hand to the electric bell the door was opened by Arthur's wife. She looked anxious and had evidently been weeping.

She put up her hand for silence and came into the garden.

"I saw you walking up the path," she said, "and I came out to stop your ringing. He's asleep—Arthur. I've had a bad time with him. I'm a bit frightened. Was he drunk last night? I'll beg you to tell me the truth, Mr. West, because if you don't, nobody will. He didn't name you, but I was up waiting for him and I heard your voice. And, when I asked him if you'd seen him home, he lied and said you had not. He swore he was quite all right; but he was far from right. He was white as a dog's tooth and surly and harsh—very unlike himself. And I've known drunken men to take it that way."

"I did see him home, Mrs. Bitton," confessed John; "but if he doesn't want you to know it, better say nothing. And if he doesn't know I've called this evening, when he wakes up, don't you mention it. No doubt he's got his reasons. To be quite honest with you, Arthur did let himself go a bit. We were having a great palaver and filled our glasses a thought too often. My fault as much as his own."

She nodded.

"He was very wild when I got him to bed and using bad language—a thing he never did before. And his eyes were fearful. I'm afraid something is going to happen to 'em. I did what I could, but it was a long time before he got to sleep, and so soon as he



did he began to dream bad dreams. 'Don't let it see me!' he yelled out; and then 'Keep the devil off me!' he shouted—so loud that I was feared of my life that he'd wake the servant girl. But she sleeps like all general servants sleep in my experience, and heard nothing.

"Arthur woke up about three o'clock, his teeth chattering and his head streaming with perspiration. Then I fetched him some hot milk, and he drank it and cried out to know the time. After dawn he went off and slept quiet; and this morning he drank a lot of tea, but wouldn't eat a bite. He said he wanted to see the doctor for some bromide. Bromide was what he clamoured for; and the doctor came by noon and wrote an order, and Arthur took two doses. Then he went to sleep and he's not woke since."

"My!" said Mr. Ringrose. "I am sorry. He oughtn't to touch liquor, I expect—even the little he allows himself. And what did the doctor say to you, ma'am?"

"I saw him back to his motor, out of earshot of Arthur, and begged to know if anything very bad was to be feared; but he thought not. He says Arthur's sound everywhere; but his mind's had an upset of some kind. He says that he seems to have undergone an ordeal—been very near frightened out of his wits. He asked if he drank, and I said he did not worth mentioning, and I'd never known him the worse for it in my life. Then he was hopeful and said I should probably find him quite himself to-morrow."

"And what did Arthur say to him?"

"Not much—just that he had come over very queer the night afore, and felt his nerves very much out of order, and so on."

"And he's said nothing to you neither?"

"Only the same."

"Hadn't seen no hobgoblins again?"

She looked at Mr. Ringrose.

"I thought of that; but he didn't say so. He'd have told me, wouldn't he?"

"I'm glad," said John. "Then you may be sure it's only the whisky. I'm none too gay myself to-day, and busy, too, about one thing and another. Don't you say I've called, or—yes—he'd think it unkind if he thought I didn't care. Just tell him I've asked for him and am glad to hear he's all right. Perhaps, when he feels like it, you'll invite me along to supper presently."

She undertook to do as he desired and Ringrose left her. For the woman he now entertained genuine sorrow; but evil has an art to bring grief upon those least responsible for it. Ringrose had never known a crime that failed to strike the innocent.

He did not see Bitton for three days, and then they met at The Crown. Arthur made no mention of his health in public, but when, presently, they left the inn together, he discussed the matter freely. It was an interview that John had impatiently awaited, for he much desired to know what progress in the vital direction he might be supposed to have made. Not on this occasion, however, did he glean much. The man was concerned with his health and in better spirits, because he found himself stronger and more cheerful. He had been taking long tramps, in which his wife had joined him.

"But now I've walked her footsore," said Mr. Bitton, "and so I've got to trudge alone. But walking

is the best cure for the nerves, and it makes me sleep, if I go on till I'm dog tired."

"Then I'll try it," vowed Ringrose, "for I don't sleep too well in my new quarters."

A day later, with a sandwich and a flask in his pocket, he joined Arthur, and together they went to Golden Cap, a lofty cliff westward of Bridport, overlooking the sea. The troubled man was more communicative on this occasion. He returned to his sufferings and evidently desired Ringrose to believe that the theory of a haunted room must be correct. John understood his motive.

"You've seen no more of that horror, I hope?" he asked, and was surprised at the answer.

"Not when I'm awake—never; but in dreams—yes," he admitted. "That's no wonder, all the same, because you do go back to shocks and startling things, off and on, when you're asleep. I dream of it."

Ringrose stuck to the subject.

"That's a true word, Arthur. Dreams show up real life. And nobody knows it better than I do. And, in my own case, in confidence, as friend to friend, I may tell you that it's not the good things that I've done that crop up again in dreams, but the bad ones. Curious that. I wouldn't say that I was worse than another; but I'm human and I've had temptations in my time to kick over the ropes here and there. And I've yielded to them. I've done a few deeds I don't look back upon with much satisfaction; and it's those that rise up by night, and sting, and make you fearful they've been found out at last. And when that happens, I'm jolly glad to wake up. Conscience will get at us in our sleep now and again, even if it

can't when we are awake. A queer thing that; but so it is."

He prosed on and the other listened with a deep but dreadful interest. Mr. Bitton was much moved, and John, furtively watching him, observed the fact.

"Conscience is a fact," he continued, "and you can tackle it and knock it out, I believe. That's the dark knowledge that comes from religion. Religion tells us to confess our sins to our fellow creatures, well knowing, no doubt, that by so doing we clean our hearts and get rid of what's called a bad conscience. I've sometimes thought I'd make a clean breast of a thing or two, to a parson; they can't say nothing about it; but they can forgive you. And then, again, I've felt that if ever I did own up, I'd far sooner go to a good, understanding friend—one who knew human nature and was a faulty man like myself, with wider sympathy and understanding of wrongdoing than a holy priest, who's lived a life without crime and never been tempted."

Those who accused John Ringrose of lacking subtlety must have admitted that during this conversation he did not fail in that respect. Indeed, for a moment he believed that his reward was near. Bitton faltered. The wretch nodded his head, agreeing silently. It was certain in the mind of Ringrose that, had any lesser villainy than that actually upon his soul distressed him, he would have confided there and then. It almost seemed that he proposed to do so.

"Once I did a thing—a-thing——" he murmured, half to himself, and the other felt every nerve go taut. But Bitton stopped and asked a question.



The horror of confessing probably tied his tongue, which a sudden human longing had set in motion.

"Have you practised what you preached, Alec?" he asked.

"I have," answered the other. "I served a straight and strong man once, and fretting over a failure—a pretty bad failure, too—I told him; and I got advice and pardon into the bargain."

"Not a parson?"

"No—just a man like myself. He did me a power of good."

Bitton was silent and the detective probed him delicately.

"We all do things we're sorry for—men, I mean, like you and me, who are all right at bottom and only weak under sudden assault. Our sins get back on us, and the better we are at heart the worse they get back on us. If a man feels no remorse, then I expect he's a wrong un by nature."

But the other did not proceed.

"No doubt you're right," he answered, and left it.

Ringrose felt heartened, nevertheless, and he was now willing to change the subject. He had made very genuine progress and believed that a substantial dent at last existed in his opponent's armour. The confession had hovered on Bitton's lips, and a time would soon come when this man's fainting courage must fail him. Then, driven desperate, he would seek to share his guilt with another, and so escape the curse that he imagined his own evil spirit had bred from it.

Ringrose often speculated on Arthur's old employer at this season, and one day it chanced, when walking in Bridport with Bitton, that they met Lord

Brooke upon the High Street. Some instinct warned John that it was he, as a small, somewhat untidy and undersized man approached them and saluted Bitton genially. There was an air of distinction about him and he conformed to the description that Mrs. Bellairs had given. Ringrose, therefore, passed on swiftly with averted face, and dived into the first shop he came to. There he remained about some trivial purchases; but the interview between Bitton and his former master was brief and in two minutes they parted.

"His lordship," he said when John emerged and rejoined him.

"Lord Brooke! That little shabby chap?"

"Yes—just as he always was. His clothes used to turn my hair grey. He didn't care, and now, when he might wear the best, he goes to a Bridport tailor, and then not till his togs are in holes."

"Who's his man nowadays?"

"A chap by the name of Burleigh—one that served in the war. He won't have any young men about him unless they did their bit."

"Did he serve himself?"

"Yes, with the Italian army—intelligence work."

"A clever man?"

"As clever as they make 'em."

"But he looked so young."

"He is young, Alec. I wouldn't say he was forty. He was a good few years younger than the late lord."

Time passed and Bitton recovered his health, but not his nerve. More than once Ringrose strove to turn the subject of their conversation to serious things;

but never again did the other come so near confession as on the walk to Golden Cap. Ringrose observed that only personal fear and misery had broken Bitton. At no time did he reveal or confess to a trace of remorse, though John gave him more than one opportunity. The detective had made various friends at Bridport ere now, and among them were children. He pressed a little boy on Bitton, with appropriate sentiments as to the hopes of youth and the duties demanded by the helplessness and appealing qualities of the young. But Arthur showed no signs. He did not like children, and revealed a callous attitude toward even the most attractive.

Disappointment lay here, for upon the work of those shadowy Eumenedes that haunt most hearts, John in a measure had built. Bitton, however, gave no sign of any moral torment. It was not the thing that he had done which made him nervous and anxious of spirit. Physical fear and the horror of being haunted by an abomination with which he was too balefully familiar—these emotions alone distressed Arthur Bitton.

At this moment it happened that there were house-breakers in Bridport, and a series of minor robberies agitated many people. Bold and skilful these rascals proved to be, and at another time Ringrose might have felt interested in their operations. The new, one-storied bungalows were easy game, but John observed that Bitton felt no fear in this connection. Objective physical perils found him equal to them, and he explained that any burglar who challenged him would meet a painful reception. The subject occupied conversation in the private bar of The Crown, on an evening

when both Ringrose and Bitton were present, and an inspector of police, half in jest, half in earnest, warned the company not to be alarmed if they should chance to hear footsteps in their gardens, or nocturnal taps at their windows.

"You bungalow fellows are the mark most times, we find," he told them, "and if you hear anything you need not fear it. You won't hear the burglars—you may take your oath of that—but my chaps are keen as mustard nowadays and getting tired of being laughed at. They go round the gardens by night and poke about, and if there's anything that looks doubtful, they'll wake the sleepers sometimes."

"I hear the nights are safe, mister," answered John. "These little thieves break into a place when the people are out at church, or shopping, or theatre-going of a Saturday night."

Two days later Jane Bitton went home for the week-end, and, under the present social threat, her husband decided not to accompany her. Indeed, their maid-of-all-work declined to be left alone. Arthur was not nervous and John spent an evening in his company.

Then came a Sunday night, which curiously reminded the detective of many a nocturnal chapter in his past career. It was long since he had turned night into day, but the necessity now confronted him and an element of genuine risk attended his programme, for the reason that the police were aroused and alert to the continued menace.

At half-past two o'clock in the morning Ringrose let himself out of his lodgings, took a road that led him directly from Bridport to the north, and then by



fields, where safety lay, descended into a lane which ran behind the new bungalows, of which Arthur Bitton's home was one. The night proved very dark and windless. The least sound travelled in the silence, and a policeman's measured footsteps reached John's ear while the man was yet seventy yards away. To conceal himself, where no lantern ray could pierce, he mounted over a low wall and crouched beneath it till the constable had passed upon his beat; while ten minutes later, John stood in Bitton's vegetable garden. He knew the house and was aware that the sleeper's chamber window opened upon this garden, its sill but four feet from the ground. A brick path ran beneath it, and Ringrose took off his shoes, that he might make no sound and leave no impression thereon. Then, swiftly and silently, he crept before the window, drew something from within his coat, wound a key, tapped on the glass, and bent down to hide against the wall beneath. Twice cautiously he tapped, then a light sprang up above him, and his ears heard the man within leap out of bed. The blind ran up and a broad beam of light spread upon the garden. But one small obstacle blocked its level way. A thing was staring in at Arthur—a red-haired, bodiless head pressed to the glass, chattering its teeth and glaring upon him. Ringrose endured a silence of seconds that seemed minutes; then he heard a smothered shriek and a fall.

A moment later, avoiding the band of light, he had crept away.

## CHAPTER IX

### A DISAPPOINTMENT

RETURNING cautiously and without incident, John Ringrose went to bed and soon slept soundly. He had a craft to empty his mind of any subject and banish it until such time as it demanded further thought and elaboration. He would reach a point and then shut off the inquiry completely, perhaps not resuming reflection upon it for a week. But his memory was strong and he could always pick up any problem again at the place to which he had brought it. On the following morning, when breakfast, which he took at eight o'clock, was ended, his dinner ordered and his sitting-room private until midday, he locked the door, approached his fireplace and prepared for an act of destruction. For good or ill he was about to burn the machine with which he had operated, and he produced now from its little box the dummy head employed upon Arthur Bitton to such terrible purpose. Bitton he knew had dropped insensible on the preceding night. Such an effect he had anticipated, and he was content that it should be so. But he designed no further assault on the other's nerves. His future attack was planned against Bitton's conscience. He intended presently to visit Arthur and, when the man was in a

condition to listen and comprehend, Ringrose proposed to challenge him and, if need be, indicate that he knew his secret crime. He desired and hoped that the other—now wrought to needful pitch—would confess without pressure and lay bare all needful details of his action and the incentives to commit it; but, failing that, Ringrose intended to accuse him and declare his own theory of Arthur's torment. This, he judged, must result in confession.

His own preliminary course of action had distressed the detective no little; but it was ended. Not again would he use the instrument of torture. He himself now loathed the object with an irrational and active dislike, that almost amused him at times when he considered it. More than its inherent hideousness awoke this sensation, for the purpose to which it had been put seemed to impart a moral significance to the inanimate object and gild it with evil. John felt in a measure unclean and almost demoralised by the horrible thing for which he was responsible. He had sent the drawing made at the Old Manor House to London under strictest secrecy, and the artist who received it was a professional manufacturer of theatrical properties. John knew him well as a personal friend, and this uncanny artist had been quick to create an abomination that made even Ringrose gasp when first he unpacked it. He had bettered the description and, while adhering exactly to the colours, shape and proportions of the dummy head, added, at John's wish, a mechanical addition by which clock-work within might make the jaws open and shut for two hours on end. Armed with this instrument the detective set out upon his horrible task, and any doubt

whether the machine were near enough to the vanished original had been dispelled at its first application. By a simple arrangement of strings, wound with his right hand under cover of his left elbow, while his arms were crossed and he was talking seriously to Bitton, he had lifted the head behind his chair on the first night and lowered it again by breaking the string when its work was done; while the second time, a spring behind it pushed the thing out upon its victim from the bookshelf when he drew forth the big book that held it back. When Bitton lay insensible, Ringrose had removed the effigy and restored *Gulliver's Travels* to its place. The third apparition only entailed personal trouble for John, and he little doubted that it had proved the most efficacious and terrific of the three. Always quick to avail himself of passing circumstance, and while yet with an open mind as to the final stroke, there had come the general threat of burglars, and the obvious inspiration by which he might avail himself of it. Chance played into his hands and, when he knew that Bitton's wife was to leave him for a night or two, he delayed only until the night before she returned.

And now in the frank morning light, like the decapitated skull of a demon, the foul thing leered up at him and he wound the clockwork and watched its mouth open and shut with a rattle. Under other circumstances he might have been tempted to keep it and add the monster to his little museum of strange and interesting objects locked up at home. But he felt no desire to do so. The creation was unclean: it exercised a curious psychological effect on Ringrose himself. He would not use it again in any case, for sure instinct



told him in the greater game presently to be played against a man of harder fibre and keener intellect than Arthur Bitton, very different and less crude means must be necessary. Yet the doll seemed to tell him something of Lord Brooke, for Lord Brooke it must be who had invented, if he had not actually manufactured, the original. Not fifty Bittons had been equal to any such feat of perverted imagination; indeed, John in his experience could summon no recollection of a criminal mind quite capable of this. It argued a creative instinct that had surely died out of human nature. Such an embodiment of evil and aboriginal bestiality could surely never quicken even the subconscious mind of a modern man. So thought Ringrose. It belonged to the time when humanity believed in devils and the pit, and artists exhausted their macabre genius in inventions of the diabolic and infamous.

Heartily glad to see the end of the thing, John thrust it into his fire, and there it gibbered and gnashed and presently caught alight. Its red hair frizzled away and the papier-maché of which it was modelled soon yielded to the flames. It grew red hot, then, with a poker, the detective beat it into dust. He almost fancied that it would incarnate itself again from the ashes; and his stolid mind actually wondered what he would do if such a shadow pursued him henceforth, to fasten upon him no less a crime than that for which Bitton had suffered. But Ringrose, though he sometimes cultivated imagination, had never known it to play tricks with him. Nor did it now. The future already presented far more interesting material than the past. He was called to reap what he had sown.

Even did Bitton confess and ease his bosom of a burden unsupportable, there remained the master criminal for whom he had committed his crime—Lord Brooke and none other. Well pleased that these preliminary phases, long grown very painful to him, were ended, John presently set forth to the Bitton bungalow. Neither terror nor evil breathed in the cool rain that fell steadily. Green had broken everywhere on the bough, and the birds sang. Bridport's broad pavements shone, and already northward rifts of azure broke the sky. The air was mild and before noon the sun promised to shine.

Ringrose lit his pipe, put up his umbrella and strolled into the purlieu of the town. He judged that his victim would probably be ill and perhaps telegraph for his wife to return sooner than she intended. He had thought it possible that he himself might receive a message; but no message came. It was half past ten o'clock when he sighted the wicket that led into Bitton's front garden; and as he did so a spectacle, familiar enough to him, confronted the detective. He stood still and his heart sank while he stared before him. He had seen many a similiar incident and they meant one thing only.

Too well he knew what had happened, but went forward into a cluster of chattering people converging to a dense company round Arthur Bitton's gate. A constable stood at the entrance and another strove to thrust the crowd back; but it gathered again immediately behind him as he moved up and down.

At the moment when Ringrose reached the spot an inspector of police descended the garden path. It was he who had spoken at The Crown and he recognised John.

"What's up, Mr. Inspector?" asked the detective, and the answer he expected came.

"You're Mr. West, aren't you—his friend? It's all over with him. Brains blown out. Suicide, by the look of it. Here's his wife, I expect."

A cab had just driven up and from it alighted Jane Bitton. But Ringrose did not desire to be seen by her. He put up his umbrella again, expressed horror at what he heard and slunk away—a bitterly disappointed man. He analysed his feelings later in the morning and found his first emotion unchanged. Keen disappointment it was that cast him down. He put the case to himself with cold impartiality as he sat before an untasted meal.

"I've terrified that man to his death; and, seeing what he was, I don't ache about that," thought John; "but I've missed his character; I've misread the wretch. I never thought he'd take that way out, and now I've got to pay for my bungling."

He calculated that he had misemployed and squandered six months of his time. Worse than that, he had made the major task still lying before him a thousand times more difficult than, given greater efficiency on his part, it might have been. But the reverse, so shattering as it must have appeared to another order of intellect, angered Ringrose with nobody but himself. Indeed, there was none else to blame. His remorse did not exist for the dead man, who had taken a life he found himself unable longer to support; it fell on his own head in a manner crushing but also tonic. John Ringrose was in fact heartily ashamed of himself, and he soon knew that only one means existed by which he might hope to regain self-

respect. As time passed and he grew cooler, he found himself astonished at the depth of his own concern and disappointment. He had failed before and yet not suffered so acutely. Failure often confronted him; it was an inevitable part of his profession, and the most successful men were merely those who failed least often. So it stood with him now upon the death of Arthur Bitton; but there awoke an obstinacy, almost ferocious, to recover the situation and achieve what, at a first glance, now appeared impossible.

There came a moment in his interminable reflections when he could find himself almost glad that Bitton was for ever out of the way. With his passing, if certain immense new difficulties were created, others, massive enough, had ceased to be. He was dead, and all the restrictions and conditions that he had probably raised to save his own skin after confession, could now be disregarded. The road ahead of John Ringrose was steep and might prove insurmountable; but it was clear. He paid the widow a visit of condolence during the evening and she was willing to see him and give him all known particulars of her husband's end.

The facts proved much as he had expected to learn them, and there was only one who could furnish any information. The general servant of the Bittons, when questioned by the police, was able to tell that at an uncertain hour she had been suddenly awakened by a sound. A noise broke her sleep and she sat up, dimly conscious of the fact; but she had not heard the noise to judge what it might be, or whence it had come. Suspecting the hoot of a motor-car on the road, she had gone to sleep again immediately and not wakened



until the morning. The moment at which the noise had aroused her she could not tell. Arthur Britton was never called by her. He always rose at half past seven o'clock and went to the bathroom, where he dressed and made his toilet. He then proceeded to the parlour and joined his wife at breakfast. Upon this day the maid followed her usual routine and took in breakfast at half-past eight. Mr. Bitton was a punctual man, but he had not as yet appeared. Half an hour later she wondered concerning him and went to the bathroom door. But it was open and she perceived that he had not yet visited it. She waited another twenty minutes and then knocked at his door but received no answer. After a further interval she grew nervous and went into the garden to see if his blind were raised. It was down; but on a nearer approach, the morning being dull, she noticed that his electric light was burning. She returned to the house, knocked noisily and shouted to him, but won no reply. She then tried the bedroom door and found it locked. Now frightened, she put on her hat, took an umbrella and walked down the street until she found a policeman. He summoned another and they returned with her and broke into the room.

Arthur Bitton was lying in his bed with a revolver still held in his hand. He had fired into his right temple and destroyed himself instantly.

It was clear to Ringrose that the dead man had recovered from his swoon and pulled down the blind again. He had then taken his life, probably with little delay, for though the maid could not tell the time at which she awoke, she affirmed with certainty that no ray of dawn had yet broken.

The detective expressed sympathetic regrets and perceived that, though deeply distressed and dismayed by her tragic loss, Mrs. Bitton appeared neither profoundly astonished nor bewildered. She was collected and could speak to him. She had known for a considerable time that her husband harboured some evil secret, for he had grown nervous and depressed, suffered from intervals of morbid fear and wakened not seldom in frenzy from bad dreams. Particulars of his discomfort Bitton never gave her, but he had hinted more than once at self-destruction.

So much Ringrose learned and was able to tell Mrs. Bitton that he had not seen Arthur on the previous day, but came that morning by appointment to take a walk.

He then left her and found himself confronted by personal problems. That he might be summoned to attend the inquest, as a close friend of the dead man, was probable; but suspecting that Lord Brooke would almost certainly be interested in that inquiry, and having no desire to be seen by his lordship, he determined to evade this danger. His purpose was instantly to disappear from Bridport, and since he had dwelt here in an assumed character and under an assumed name, he would not be traced even if a search were made. But against this course one peril presented itself. If inquiry involved him, and Mrs. Bitton was able, on consideration, to declare her husband's illness synchronised with John's acquaintance, then the accomplice of Bitton might possibly associate the vanished stranger with his death. Lord Brooke knew Bitton intimately; and it was possible, under certain circumstances, that he might suspect

"Alec West," the retired butler, to be an enemy. In any case, to submit to a probably lengthy cross-examination at the inquest under the eye of his lordship must handicap him gravely in the future. Moreover, the necessity for lying on oath by no means appealed to Mr. Ringrose, no matter what exonerating circumstances might rest with his own conscience.

He made a hurried departure, therefore, and before it was possible for any to seek him had taken train from Bridport for London.

Thus vanished the genial Alec West from earth—to return once more at a later time. A week afterwards he discussed the suicide with an old colleague, who had acquaintance at the town, and found himself much interested by the report in a local newspaper. The retired butler—Bitton's friend—was merely mentioned, but no attempt to find him had been made. Mrs. Bitton's testimony and the clear evidence of self-destruction explained the matter and a conventional verdict concluded the proceedings.

John Ringrose was glad to read the full local account in his friend's newspaper, for it related a minor incident of interest to him.

Lord Brooke had been present at the coroner's inquest, and his relations with the dead man being known, he was invited to answer a few questions, which he readily agreed to do. He had employed Arthur Bitton for many years and found him a trustworthy and intelligent body-servant. He was unaware of any private anxieties from which the valet might suffer, and he knew nothing of his private life. He had left his service on being married. In temper he was

excitable and highly strung, but with those qualities went many virtues. He expressed his sympathy with the widow, that her husband's mind should have given way and provoked such a terrible catastrophe.



## CHAPTER X

### THE SECOND CAMPAIGN OPENS

JOHN RINGROSE well knew that far greater difficulties now challenged him than those the death of Arthur Bitton had resolved. He defined his position and took a week to consider it.

A child had been murdered and the instrument of the crime was dead; but the hand that held that weapon—the evil genius responsible and the reaper of the reward—still went unsuspected.

He weighed the scanty material or knowledge that he possessed. Bitton had rarely been communicative touching his former master and the detective could command few facts to guide him. He knew, however, that Lord Brooke was difficult of approach save on the ground of his hobby. Nothing else interested him, and of personal friends and intimates Bitton had always maintained that he possessed but few. He did not need friends. He was genial and kindly to everybody; yet cultivated no wide circle of acquaintance and entertained only such as shared his knowledge and enthusiasm. More than that John Ringrose did not know.

To approach as an equal was impossible. He could not pretend to belong to Lord Brooke's order; because,

though members of it might not know each other, they invariably knew all about each other. Neither would John pretend to knowledge of his lordship's subject. Such a past master would instantly see through any attempted deception of that sort. To work up the necessary material was easy; but to build upon it the wide grasp and familiarity of a specialist could not be done.

He learned all there was to know of Lord Brooke's family and found the title of very recent creation. Indeed, only the present holder's father and elder brother had borne it before him. But the race of the Bewes had resided at Brooke-Norton for centuries. Ambition had prompted Algernon Bewes to aspire to a peerage, and as a man of great wealth and an economic expert, his services to the government during the war achieved a barony. Dying two years after his distinction, he left two sons, Rupert Bewes, who succeeded him, and Burgoyne, the present holder of the title. With the latter his father had quarrelled. Burgoyne, until his accession, dwelt at Florence, and Arthur Bitton had mentioned an old retainer, one William Rockley, who was lodge-keeper at his master's Italian villa. As for the late lord, he had died as a widower in Italy, leaving two children—the boy, Ludovic, and an elder girl called Mildred. The Honourable Mildred Bewes dwelt with Lord Brooke.

In a week John Ringrose had matured his plans; and once again preliminary action led him to another man—a gentleman who most certainly owed the detective his best services. For Mr. Caleb Prosser had at one time stood within a step of the dock, as a receiver, or "fence," and but for John's good offices

must have gone to prison. Ringrose, however, assured in his own mind that Mr. Prosser had acted in perfect honesty, saved a perilous situation and won another friend.

He called at the business premises of Caleb Prosser, to find a tall and stooping veteran very glad to see him. John joined the pawnbroker at his tea and chatted on general subjects a while until the meal was ended. Mr. Prosser not only traded under the three golden balls, but dealt in old furniture, old china, old armour and, indeed, everything old, or pseudo-ancient. Wardour Street held no more heterogeneous collection than his, yet he knew all that he possessed to the least trinket and curio. His memory was as well stored as his shop and the cavernous warehouse behind it. The pawnbroking, under direction of Mrs. Prosser, occupied a separate establishment next door to the curiosity shop, and over the latter Caleb dwelt.

"I've come," said Ringrose, "on the subject of old ivories, Prosser; and I mustn't be fobbed off with any of your doubtful stuff. Mediæval ivories are my mark for the moment, and some day, perhaps, I'll tell you why I want them, but not now."

Mr. Prosser looked thoughtfully from under his coarse eyebrows at the detective.

"Not something you think you've traced to me? Not something—missing?"

"No, nothing of that sort. But I want to lay my hand on ivories, even one ivory, about which there's no manner of doubt that it's very choice and very valuable—such a rare ivory that a collector would strain his resources to add it to his collection. Something unique and worth a lot of money."

Mr. Prosser was interested.

"I understand 'em," he said. "I know about that stuff—quite a lot. The demand is narrow and limited, but a few collect them, and they've raked my shop before to-day. The things are rare, and experts don't make any mistake, of course. My last real treasure I sold six months ago to Lord Brooke. He's the biggest amateur. But you'd look far to find anything to interest him. I've got ivories that I can show you—a dozen; but when you say 'something worth a lot of money,' I can't help you."

"Then somebody else must. Who are the big men in the trade?"

"It's not a trade. It's just a line. You won't find any specialists, and when a very good thing comes into the market, the two or three who are known to want it will always get the first refusal. Only when folk die and collections go to the hammer does a great ivory change hands nowadays. The famous pieces are almost as well known as the famous gems."

Ringrose nodded.

"What I want," he said, "is not necessarily to purchase, but to borrow. I want the loan of a tip-top thing for my own purposes. But nothing less than a real masterpiece will do. I'd pay for the privilege of the loan, Prosser, and of course insure the treasure while in my possession. If I may sell it, so much the better. Suppose now, I offered a hundred pounds for the loan of an ivory that the collectors would be glad to purchase. Could you borrow such a piece?"

The old man considered. He took off a little black cap of silk and scratched the bald head under it.



"You ask a peculiar question and make a peculiar offer," he said; "but I'm not very hopeful. There is such a piece as you're after—the property of a woman friend of mine—a genuine Goldoni of the Italian Renaissance period, and worth, I dare say, a thousand pounds. She was a rich woman's housekeeper in Scotland, and the ivory came to her when her mistress died. It was meant as a legacy and to be sold; but Mrs. Campbell wouldn't part with it. I offered her six hundred—all I could afford; but she's comfortably off and though four figures might tempt her, I dare say, three did not."

"That looks right. And where's Mrs. Campbell?"

"At Edinburgh—No. 13 Rice Street. She's one of the best and would gladly pleasure any friend of mine if in her power, Mr. Ringrose."

"I must go up then; and I'll ask you to write me a letter of introduction—merely saying that you can vouch for me and that I may be able to do her a service. It will be true. You must not tell her my real name, however."

"It never does to ask too much about your business, my good friend. But I thought you'd retired. Didn't your folk give you a rare send-off and a gold watch?"

Ringrose laughed.

"That's right. But this is another story, Prosser—a story I'll tell you, maybe, when I know the end of it."

He waited for his letter, decided to be known as "Mr. Norman Fordyce," and two days later was in Edinburgh—a city very familiar to him.

Armed with the introduction, he found Rice Street and Mrs. Campbell, won her with no great difficulty and explained that he had sought their common friend,

Caleb Prosser, who, on learning the nature of his quest, had instantly remembered Mrs. Campbell and the Goldoni ivory.

She showed it to him and he thought it more curious than beautiful. But the lady had found her life complicated since last she saw Mr. Prosser. A nephew out of work made demands upon her purse, and, for his mother's sake, Rose Campbell spent money upon him and needed more to spend. She was, in fact, prepared to sell the ivory and had already contemplated writing to Caleb Prosser on the subject.

John explained that he knew a client who might very likely pay more for the piece than Mr. Prosser, and before they had reached this stage in the bargain, Mrs. Campbell already believed in Mr. Fordyce and found him a cheerful and agreeable acquaintance.

The upshot was a letter to Lord Brooke, and on a morning in June his lordship, descending to breakfast, discovered the following communication awaiting him:

THE ANCHOR AND CROWN HOTEL, EDINBURGH.  
TO THE BARON BROOKE,  
Brooke-Norton, Bridport,  
Dorset.

MY LORD: There has come into my hands for disposal a piece of old carved ivory, once an heirloom in the ancient family of the Gowers, and said to have been the property of Mary, Queen of Scots. The specimen is the work of Goldoni, the famous carver of Florence, and it is now in the possession of a lady, once a housekeeper in the Gower family, to whom it was bequeathed by a former mistress.

Mrs. Campbell is her name, and she has entrusted the treasure to me in hope that I may be able to find a purchaser for it. Experts have informed her that the specimen is worth not less than one thousand pounds, and possibly more to the few who collect such treasures. I learn, also, that you are first among such collectors, and would wish, therefore, to submit it to you before taking it elsewhere.

I am your lordship's obedient servant.

NORMAN FORDYCE.

An answer came within three days:

BROOKE-NORTON, DORSET.

DEAR SIR: I beg to thank you for your interesting communication. If you will send the ivory to me by registered post, I shall be able to tell you all about it. If a genuine Goldoni, it should possess some value, but, alas! I fear that is improbable. In any case the sum you mention would seem to argue mistaken knowledge on the part of the Edinburgh experts. But are there any experts in Edinburgh? I never heard of any.

Faithfully yours,

BROOKE.

MR. NORMAN FORDYCE.

To this proposal John replied that the possessor of the treasure declined to trust it in the post. He proposed, if agreeable, to bring the ivory himself, and asked if it were possible to put him up for the night, that time might be gained. He trusted his own talents

to win a welcome if once he was received, and the entertaining history and experiences of Norman Fordyce, retired commercial traveller, were already at the detective's command.

With some anxiety he awaited the reply to his request and it proved satisfactory. The Goldoni was evidently a worthy object. In his second letter John had expatiated on the ivory and added certain particulars concerning it gleaned from a Scots jeweller, who was well known to Mrs. Campbell and familiar with the treasure.

Lord Brooke desired only to know the train by which Mr. Fordyce would reach Bridport. A car for Brooke-Norton would await him and he might count on his lordship's hospitality.

Of these details, however, Rose Campbell learned nothing. John, having enjoyed a few days at Edinburgh, departed with the ivory, nor did its owner feel the least uneasiness, for she was skilled in human nature and a canny woman, who knew where she might trust. They agreed that she would accept not less than a thousand pounds, and if the ivory commanded more, so much the better.

"Don't miss the thousand, Mr. Fordyce," was her parting instruction, "but if you can screw the gentleman up another hundred, it's going to mean a braw case of whisky for you if you'll accept the same."

She proposed buying a jeweller's new casket for the treasure, but this Mr. Ringrose would not permit.

"The old one will sit him better," he assured her.

In fading light the detective arrived after his long journey and found a closed motor-car awaiting him.



He ran through the familiar streets of Bridport and passed his old quarters and the home of the late Arthur Bitton. Then, over fair green country in the dusk he sped, and at half-past nine o'clock passed twin lodges and ran a final mile through park lands to a great Jacobean dwelling that towered ash grey through the gloaming. He carried a hand bag, was clad in Harris tweed, with a hat of the same material, and had adopted no disguise whatever.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE BARTHEL IVORY

AN excellent meal awaited John Ringrose. Dinner was done, but while he ate and drank, his host walked up and down the great dining-room and chatted with urbanity, hoping that he had made good travel and was not fatigued.

But the visitor suffered from a headache and felt, indeed, exceedingly weary after a hot and protracted journey. He struck the right note, however, and responded to his welcome. He entertained his host with certain humorous adventures on the way, and finding the master of Brooke-Norton not lacking in humour, albeit of a satirical and mischievous quality, was quick to chime with him and create the impression of a kindred spirit from another sphere than his lordship's own. The collector was cheerful and full of vitality. He displayed a lively if somewhat cynical temperament. For a moment a shadow of thought clouded his eyes when first he looked at John, but it passed, and he accorded the heartiest greeting. No mention whatever was made of the reason for Mr. Ringrose's visit. During the hour they spent together, after John had supped, they chatted upon indifferent topics, and when they left the dining-room for a

billiard-room, a second man joined them. He was tall, handsome, easy and amiable. Lord Brooke introduced him as Nicholas Tremayne, and presently, refusing to play, the newcomer marked for the younger men. Both were above average amateur form, but Tremayne proved the better player.

While he sat and watched, John had leisure to study the man he regarded as a murderer. Lord Brooke had the direct and fearless gaze of a practiced liar. The detective was an unconscious but sound student of physiognomy, and he saw here one whose eyes struck him as too honest. So, surely, Jago must have looked. It seemed an absurd suspicion, yet he knew that he was right. A straight man may be self-confident and assertive, or diffident and modest. Some of the most trustworthy men whom John had known never looked him in the face while others did; but seldom in this unwinking, genial fashion. It was not that Lord Brooke treated him as an inferior, or with the slightly contemptuous familiarity, to be observed when one person entertains that impression of another. His manners were perfect. He proved a splendid listener and his cynicism possessed such a fine quality and played so delicately through the texture of his thought that even a humanist might hardly have quarrelled with it. He suggested an onlooker rather than a participant in the battle of life. He was generally interested in existence and found it an entertaining experience; but not until he touched his own subject did he show any absorbing and avid pre-occupation.

To that they came next day; but John dropped one word, after the game had ended in a victory for Mr. Tremayne, and he asked permission to retire.

"Your lordship will forgive me for leaving the ivory until to-morrow?" he begged, and Lord Brooke made answer.

"Why, of course, Mr. Fordyce. Indeed, I'd forgotten all about it. Because I'm a crazy man, I don't expect others to share my craze. Tremayne here is only interested in ivory when it takes the shape of billiard balls; yet I forgive him his Philistinism. To quarrel with the Philistines is to become a very lonely being, and I hate loneliness. D'you take your breakfast in your room, or will you join us at any time after nine o'clock?"

"I'll join you, please," declared Ringrose.

He slept soundly, awoke refreshed by seven o'clock, and seeing a very beautiful, formal garden spreading in the morning sunshine beneath his window, quickly rose, entered the bathroom which adjoined his apartment, and presently descending, went out of doors.

His purpose was to stay for at least another night, if not longer, at Brooke-Norton, and he believed that tact and judicious treatment of his host might secure this end. In any case it could be managed through the ivory he had brought; but he preferred that the invitation to remain should come spontaneously, if possible. His powers of adaptation, and that subtle gift to win a fellow man, he trusted to work his way.

Mr. Ringrose strolled in the flower-lighted garden, rejoiced at the unclouded joy of a June morning, and was presently turning to extend his ramble when, at the corner of a lofty yew hedge, cut stiff and square to the height of a man's shoulder, he came upon a fellow creature.



A girl approached him clad in white. She carried a basket of crimson and orange-coloured roses, looked up shyly, and gave the visitor a little ghostly smile. The detective took off his hat and bowed genially. He knew that he stood before Miss Mildred Bewes; but since he was supposed to be unaware of her existence, saluted her in an impersonal though kindly fashion. The difference in their ages excused him.

"Good morning, miss—an early bird like myself, I see! D'you know that this is about the loveliest garden I've ever set eyes on? I didn't believe there was such a fairyland."

Mildred Bewes looked even younger than her years. She was fair, with pale brown eyes and a beautiful little head surmounted by great riches of flaxen hair. She was lovelier than the flowers, thought John, but something very wistful and sad looked out of her eyes. The girl possessed distinction combined with delicacy. She was tall and slight, but seemed to lack the hearty vitality of youth. An expression suggesting that life had both puzzled and saddened Mildred Bewes sat upon her young face.

She answered Mr. Ringrose, unconsciously at ease in his kindly presence.

"You're Uncle Burgoyne's friend, I expect? I ought to have welcomed you last night. I hope you had a good journey, though it must have been a very long one."

"It was, but I've forgotten it. What grand roses! You're coming from a rose garden, perhaps?"

"Yes, my very own. Would you like to see it?"

They strolled together amid a riot of bright blossoms, and the least flush of excitement tinged the girl's

cheeks as she told the sympathetic listener of her treasures. But it seemed that the past had left its stamp upon her face as well as her heart. She was not a happy girl and her voice had something melancholy in its gentle notes. Then a strange thing happened, for from her temporary cheerfulness among the roses and pleasure excited by the stranger's interest, sudden complete silence fell upon Mildred at the advent of another. He looked a pleasant and agreeable object—this tall, brown-faced, handsome young man; but Nicholas Tremayne's appearance, bare-headed, in white flannels and with a towel over his shoulder, woke no friendly response from the girl. She fell behind the men as they returned to the house.

"Had a dip in the lake," said Tremayne. "Thought you were coming, Mildred."

She shook her head.

"I've been gardening. My roses are so busy coming out just now."

He took a bud from her basket and put it in his buttonhole. Then he turned to John.

"Hope you slept well and are rested, Mr. Fordyce?" he said. "Isn't this a ripping place? I live on the north coast of Cornwall, you know, where the west wind simply defies gardening. But I've got some trees, haven't I, Mildred?"

"Noble trees," she answered, and then fell farther behind and left them at a turning. A moment of discontent darkened Tremayne's eyes, but it soon vanished and he was talking amiably to the other visitor again.

At breakfast Mildred took the foot of the table, while Lord Brooke sat at the head of it. They helped

themselves from the sideboard, and Ringrose made his observations. He perceived that the Cornishman appeared genuinely attached to Lord Brooke's niece, but that her attitude to him was one of indifference. She showed no active aversion and fell into fitful moments of animated talk between intervals of silence. She ate little and relapsed sometimes, as though private reflection shut out her surroundings. Then she would come to herself again and chat amiably, yet always with a note of reserve in her voice. Her affection for her uncle was evidently genuine enough and she looked after him and made him eat and drink. He talked much, however.

"After breakfast," he said, "and before I see your treasure, Mr. Fordyce, you must visit mine. You say that ivories don't interest you personally. Well, others have said the same until I introduced them to a wonderful subject. You are going to be interested in spite of yourself. Then we'll look at the Goldoni and see, first, if it is a Goldoni; secondly, whether the owner has not been mis-informed as to its value."

He talked of his adventures with humour and surprising candour; but it was the art that concealed art. Ringrose knew that he confronted a villain; yet he did not permit the knowledge to confuse or influence impartial judgment. He came to Lord Brooke with an open mind, unbiassed by his secret information. He was quick to tune his note to the other and found his lordship apparently neither moral nor unmoral in his values, his outlook on life and its obligations.

"A Zamindar in Trichinopoly had a marvellous Chinese piece purchased from a coolie for a few beggarly pice," he said, "and seeing the man had deliber-

ately robbed his servant, I robbed him. The Zamindar knew well enough that his ivory was worth much more than he paid; but he had not the faintest idea of its true worth. I went all across India for that specimen. And I got it for one-third of its value. No use being an expert, Mr. Fordyce, if you're going to pay what things are worth! One attains to knowledge, with prayer and fasting, in order to avail oneself of other people's ignorance. I've often paid more than a thing was intrinsically worth, for my own reasons; and that being so, I have equally often paid less than real value, to right the balance."

Mr. Ringrose laughed.

"That bodes ill for the Goldoni," he said.

He had already appreciated the fact that Lord Brooke desired him to see great and inestimably precious ivories, that the one in his pocket might look poor beside them.

And presently they met in a long gallery lighted from the roof, through which ran glass-topped cases, as in a museum. The walls were a dark purple and upon them hung pictures of the Flemish school collected by a former head of the family. But these did not interest Lord Brooke. He drew up blinds, that ran over the top lights of the apartment, and threw morning illumination upon the cases. Then, accompanied by John and young Tremayne, his lordship set out on a perambulation among his treasures.

"Roman ivories earlier than the fourth century are infinitely rare," he began, "but here's one from an Etruscan tomb. There's a better one in the British Museum, which I hope to steal some day if I get an opportunity. Here you see a complete, consular



diptych: a great gem. Many good men have broken the tenth commandment when they first saw that. These things were used by the Roman consuls, so history affirms. The best in the world languishes in two parts—half at South Kensington Museum, the remainder at Hôtel de Cluny in Paris. If the French won't pay our debts in cash, they might in kind. We ought to have their half. But Latins are ever greedy as the grave. If you want to learn how to steal like a gentleman, you must live in Italy, as I used to do."

He chatted on, with a flood of knowledge over which ran ripples of ribaldry and sardonic humour. Lord Brooke loved to talk upon his subject and Ringrose did not withhold admiration. He was genuinely entertained, and while the information respecting ivories went in at one ear and out at the other, the more valuable, implicit demonstration of the owner's character was not lost upon him. He found in Lord Brooke pretty much what he had expected to find. His lordship revealed a disarming quality that suggested an ingenuous nature, for he appeared to be amazingly frank and talked about himself, his triumphs and also his disappointments without reserve. He had no objection to a joke against himself, and made the visitor laugh long and loud with his description of a Sicilian prince who, having sold him a forgery, had been cornered and beaten by superior cunning in the end.

Through a maze of carven horns, combs, caskets, sword hilts, powder flasks and tiny statuettes, Lord Brooke led the attentive eyes of Mr. Ringrose. Then they inspected book covers, rosaries of beads carved with sacred subjects, pyxes and other objects of church

use. There were images of the Virgin and the saints, and crucifixes of exquisite workmanship, inspired with the patient genius of a thousand mediæval craftsmen.

"Men loved their work as well as their wages in those days," explained Lord Brooke. "Now only the number of hours and the number of shillings are the things that interest the artificer—the number of hours he must spend pretending to work and the number of shillings he must dishonestly acquire by doing so.

"It is thought," he continued, "that the great Renaissance sculptors are responsible for many of these glorious treasures. But we cannot attribute any special pieces to the known masters. We may be looking at authentic masterpieces of Cellini, or Raphael, for both loved to play with ivory. One can hardly imagine that Michelangelo himself touched anything so small. It would have been rather like an elephant picking up a pin: yet I have ivories quite as majestic and mighty in their own way as the Medici monuments. Size is nothing."

He showed John the Italian work of the sixteenth century from the pupils of Vicentino and Bernardo; while examples of Du Quesnoy, "the Fleming"; of Zeller; of Leo Pronner, Van Obstal, Kern and a dozen others were also displayed.

It was among the specimens of Dutch work that Ringrose received a shock. Something familiar, though reduced to the size of a filbert nut, suddenly stared at him from a great ivory, the work of a fanatic genius. It was a carving of the mouth of hell from which peeped two devils as large as mice. Infinite horror was packed into that plate of bone, and something like a shiver of repulsion went through Ringrose as he scanned it;

for it awakened memory and solved a problem from the past. He restrained himself, believed his surprise unobserved and moved his glance quickly to the next case, before which his host now stood.

"Here are my tiniest treasures," explained Lord Brooke. "The sixteenth century gives us some exceedingly curious, minute works, and I have a fairly representative collection. They are worth their weight in diamonds, Fordyce. Entire compositions of numerous figures are here carved by that amazing miniaturist, Properzia de Rossi, on a peach stone. At Florence is a cherry stone on which a whole 'Gloria' of saints is carved. God knows who did it. I may convey that to my collection yet. Not difficult to conceal a cherry stone. Leo Pronner, too, the Nuremberg master, whose work I showed you, carved microscopic works on cherry stones. Now we come to the realists."

He brought them to a case containing a thousand netsuké, and John—a realist himself—enjoyed the Japanese art more genuinely than all that had gone before it.

Two hours thus passed and then Lord Brooke called a halt.

"You'll get a headache if you see any more," he said. "This fine carving means a tremendous strain on the optic nerve, and you've been uncommonly keen and attentive. I'll let you off now, Mr. Fordyce. Enjoyed it?"

"Profoundly," answered the other. "An expert always fills me with admiration—except a handwriting expert."

It was an unguarded admission and he cursed himself and hastened to qualify it with a funny story. Then

they left the gallery and Lord Brooke demanded to see the Italian ivory, to be sold to him if he so willed.

"Come and have a drink in the library, and rest your fevered brow and show me the Goldoni," said his lordship; and ten minutes later the piece from Edinburgh lay in Lord Brooke's hand.

"I'm afraid it looks commonplace enough after the magic things you've showed me," confessed the detective, helping himself to a cigar. "You've given me some very genuine entertainment and generous hospitality; but I hope you won't think it was wasted and that I'm here under false pretences."

"Ivory or no ivory, you were welcome for yourself, and my debt is to you for some lively companionship," answered the other gracefully. But he spoke mechanically, for his attention was entirely upon the little work of art in his hand. He rose, took a large magnifying glass from his table and then returned with it to the bay of the window, where ran a wide, upholstered seat.

Ringrose was now planning to extend his visit and desired an invitation to come from the other. He smoked and kept silent; while Tremayne, realising that a private business transaction would now occupy his friend, finished a whisky and soda and left the room.

At last Lord Brooke spoke.

"This is a genuine Goldoni and I won't treat you to any humbug. It's a very fine piece. What more likely than the truth of the legend you report concerning it? What more probable than that David Riccio presented this brooch to Mary, Queen of Scots? What more certain than that this beautiful thing



adorned her majesty's fair bosom? I, for one, believe it. It ought to be true and I will make it true."

"Glad your lordship is pleased," said John.

"Exceedingly pleased. I will give seven hundred and fifty pounds for it."

But Ringrose shook his head.

"I'm much afraid that won't meet the case. The lady was very definite for four figures."

"Ready money has such charm. At least I always found it so when it was scarce with me. Let us telegraph. Eight hundred down—really a good price. I don't pretend it's not a splendid thing and that I don't want it; but shouldn't you say eight hundred was handsome?"

"I cannot pretend to judge, Lord Brooke; but you know. I'll do as you will, however, and telegraph this morning. Mrs. Campbell may share your natural feeling for the charm of ready money. I'm sure I do."

Half an hour later the detective strolled into the little township of Brooke-Norton; and he took a companion, for on learning of his intention, young Tremayne expressed a wish to join him. Ringrose had made a conquest of the Cornishman and now found him amiable and communicative. It was a gift rather than an acquired art to win the rising generation, for John continued young enough in spirit to share their interests; he inspired confidence and his honest enthusiasm for young humanity won their trust.

Nicholas Tremayne listened while the elder praised Lord Brooke.

"Amazing man—an example of real, expert knowledge. And generous, too, for nothing can be more

deadly dull to an expert than grinding over the old ground with a duffer."

"You're not a duffer, though. You asked him a number of questions that no duffer would have asked. You interested him. He liked you tremendously."

"He'll like me less, I fear, if I can't meet him over the ivory. But he mustn't blame me. The owner is a Scot and quite sure her treasure is worth a thousand pounds."

"Take it easy," advised Tremayne, "I know Burgoyne so well. He loves to bargain. He's more oriental than English at heart—an extraordinary chap. If you can stop another night and work him up into one of his generous moods you'll get the money all right."

"I shouldn't like to take more than the thing is worth, however."

"You needn't bother about that. Money's no object to him. But he won't pay more than it's worth—that I will bet."

Ringrose, guessing how the wind blew, sounded his companion upon the subject of Lord Brooke's niece.

"What a charming girl," he said. "There's something strangely winning about her. She's lovely, of course; but she's more than that. One feels almost as though there were a mystery there. She evidently cares a great deal for his lordship, and she loves her beautiful home; but is she happy? It may be an accident of expression; yet a young, splendid creature in the flush of youth ought not to look so melancholy. I hope she isn't sad. I don't like to think of young people sad."

Tremayne hesitated to enter upon personal subjects, but John's frank interest and the humane quality

of his voice compelled. The power of sympathy, as love itself, is infinitely greater than any accident of class. Indeed, Nicholas, who was a warm-hearted youth and very much in love, recognised that no mere curiosity inspired the visitor. He was soon revealing his story, and much of it Ringrose already knew.

"She is lovely—an angel—and she is sad; and she's got a jolly good reason for being sad, Mr. Fordyce. If it interests you, I'll tell you. Mildred used to live in Italy with her father and brother. Then the late Lord Brooke met with his tragic death, two years after Lady Brooke died, and his girl and boy were left for their uncle to take care of. Burgoyne Bewes, as he was then, did everything possible. As for the boy, he was a weakling—a hopeless invalid from his childhood—mental trouble and general feebleness, so I understand. Soon the girl was left alone; but an infernal complication occurred. During her father's life she became engaged to a chap—a doctor, who practised on Lake Como, at Menaggio, where her father lived and her mother died. The late Lord Brooke sanctioned the engagement, though not really a suitable one, because he happened to be sentimentally attached to the doctor. The man, apparently, was all that he should be as a physician, and he attended Lady Brooke with devotion to the end of her life. But after Lord Brooke himself died, and the girl came home with her uncle to this place, the blasted doctor broke off the engagement. Brooke says he doesn't believe the chap really cared a button for Mildred. At any rate he never wrote to her again, but let her uncle know he thought that Mildred was rather too young for him, and that they had better allow their understanding to cease. A blessing in

disguise for Mildred, really, and Brooke was thankful, though he had to work up a certain amount of indignation on poor Mildred's behalf."

"Indeed, I'm sorry for the beautiful child. But we'll hope, as you say, it was a blessing in disguise. And, since your friend has succeeded to the title, I suppose she lost her brother, too?"

"Yes; he died, mercifully. But now you see why she's sad. She hasn't got over it yet, though God knows I'm trying to make her."

"I gathered that! Good luck. Maybe it's too soon if she really loved the doctor. But she must be very young still."

"Eighteen."

"She doesn't look it even in her melancholy moments. She seems to have a tender, gentle nature. Who was the doctor?"

"A blighter called Considine—that's all I ever knew of him. Brooke says he heard that he had married an American widow with tons of cash a year ago. He was after Mildred's fortune, probably, and, when he found the American lady, guessed she would suit him better."

John Ringrose listened, but only one word of the young man's chatter had arrested his thoughts. They reached the post office, dispatched the telegram to Mrs. Campbell, then strolled over the neighbouring golf links until an answer should be received.

Tremayne continued to interest John, but he dropped the subject of Mildred. He spoke of Cornwall and on general subjects, for already his mind found itself occupied with greater matters than the young man's love affair. Presently they returned to the post office. A reply to the telegram had arrived, and it was



exceedingly definite. The owner would not take a penny less than one thousand pounds.

Ringrose, on their return, coupled with this intelligence a proposition. He spoke after Lord Brooke had read the telegram and lifted his eyes to the visitor's face.

"I'm sorry, but what say you to this? Shall I write to her and tell her more than was possible in the telegram? Perhaps persuasion might have good results. If I wrote to-day and put it that you can turn your offer into guineas, she might relent. I mustn't trespass on your hospitality longer, but could stop at Bridport until Mrs. Campbell had time to reflect again and reply."

Then that happened which he desired, and Lord Brooke approved his plan, save in one particular.

"Probably useless, but worth trying. I'll give eight hundred and fifty pounds—that's the limit, and really a good price. Meanwhile, you must stop with me, if I don't bore you."

"Nothing would please me better, but I'm rather an intruder, I fear. You see, if you can't come to terms, I shall have enjoyed your company and hospitality under false pretences, in a way."

Lord Brooke, however, would take no denial and Ringrose prolonged his visit. The letter was written, with certain inspirations from his lordship, and John remained for another twenty-four hours. He found his host exceedingly agreeable and considerate. They met on common ground of acute intelligence, and the visitor granted to himself that the collector possessed a wit and quickness of perception superior to his own in certain directions. He was faced with an un-English

order of mind—a sort of cosmopolitan intellect that he had observed working in many a criminal head. The man did not appear to act, because it was his nature to be always acting. He looked at life histrionically, yet could be serious enough on his one subject. For the rest, his attitude to existence and its problems was ironic and indifferent, but highly experienced. He had plenty of imagination, yet reserved its use for the ivories and all they embraced of story. He was far from reticent, indeed, communicative, and even confidential in his conversation. He spoke of his niece, indicated that she had suffered a cruel disappointment and hoped that she might presently learn to care for the Cornishman. On the subject of literature, Lord Brooke declared that he read only Italian authors, and found them answer his needs.

“Machiavelli, Gobineau and d’Annunzio meet my mental requirements,” he said. “Sometimes I think I will translate Machiavelli again; but it’s been done so often. Gobineau is translated also—a great man without illusions. There’s Neitzsche, too, of course. He’s slowly coming into his own.”

Exceedingly clever; genial on the surface, and as hard as flint underneath: thus the detective summed up Lord Brooke.

They sat until after midnight, and when he went to bed, Ringrose, at the other’s request, took with him *The Inequality of Human Races*, for he had never heard of Gobineau. But he did not read. He summed the information of the day and dwelt on two significant items of knowledge which stood out of the general acquirement, as mountain peaks above a valley. One was the ivory that depicted the mouth of hell; the

other a solitary word spoken in conversation by Nicholas Tremayne. The young man, in discussing Mildred Bewes, had described her father's end as "tragic."

With profound interest Ringrose fastened upon that adjective—"like a drowning man to a straw," as he told himself. People are apt to use the word "tragic" when often they mean "sudden" and no more; but for the detective these two syllables promised to possess no small significance until he learned particulars. Thus far he had done nothing beyond confirm convictions already established. The ivory had only served to illuminate a minor mystery, and did not advance his own enterprise by a hair's breadth, for he had as yet gained no ground of vantage from which his own attack might be delivered. Nor had such ground as much as risen above the horizon. To bring a man of Lord Brooke's calibre face to face with his crime, promised a task for which the detective felt no material at present existed. So far not a shadow of apparent suspicion had been created in his lordship's mind against John himself; but he was well aware that the mentality of the man opposed to him might swiftly awaken into doubt; and how to take the needful preliminary steps without incurring that danger occupied the detective until he slept. But that the problem remained unsolved did not interfere with his repose. This was not the first time he had found it needful to build bricks without straw.

## CHAPTER XII

### LORD BROOKE BUYS THE GOLDONI

IN his letter to the owner of the Goldoni ivory, Ringrose impressed upon her the need for swift decision and the importance of answering by telegram. Mrs. Campbell would receive the communication at noon, and John intended catching an evening train for Bridport, that he might be in time to take the night mail from London to the North. In truth he was not returning to Edinburgh, but declared that to be his intention.

He neither knew nor cared as to the fate of the treasure; but with morning there came a determination which promised to make considerable demands upon him. The challenge was massive; its difficulties had increased rather than diminished on better knowledge of Lord Brooke. He now felt deeply concerned to learn facts, yet knew they could only be won indirectly, if at all. A direct inquiry from any of those in a position to answer would be out of the question. But all three persons with whom he was for the moment in contact must know what he desired to know, and he suspected that from Tremayne he might most easily and safely glean the particulars. Had he, indeed, done so, it is possible that his own



plans might have been modified; but from another—one more familiar with details than Tremayne—he finally acquired his information, and that in a manner unclouded by danger. For Mildred Bewes was his informant, and while chatting with her alone in the garden on the following day, she spoke of herself.

He had remarked that her uncle was devoted to the South, and she declared that she shared his love of it.

"I lived nearly all my life in Italy," she said. "My father had a villa on Lake Como, which he bought for mother, and though we used to come home every summer and go farther south in the winter, yet, for my mother's sake, he finally lived there nearly all the year round. She was happier there than anywhere. I went to school at Milan. Then my dear mother died and it nearly killed father. He had lived only for her through their married life, and when he died himself, two years after her, I should have broken my heart if I had not known he had gone back to her."

"Indeed, you have had much to suffer, my dear."

"Yes, it made me rather old, Mr. Fordyce. I had much to suffer, as you say. Suffering does make you old, I think. I try to feel young, and Uncle Burgoyne does his best to make me. But—oh, so many cruel things have happened to me that I can't believe, sometimes, I'm only eighteen. I feel fifty. Life's ended, in a way."

"You mustn't say that, Miss Bewes. I'm very sure your dear parents would not like to think you felt the burden of life too heavy."

"I hope they don't know. I'm sure Heaven can't be a very happy place, Mr. Fordyce, if those in it, who love living people, are told what's happening to them. My dear father died a terrible death. He was always on horseback, you know, after mother passed away. Riding soothed him more than anything. He loved to climb the hills to the upland pastures, and had beautiful, strong horses that could carry him. And I rode with him often. And then death came to him high—high up under the great mountain between Como and Lugano. He and his horse fell over a precipice together."

"Terrible, indeed; yet perhaps not so terrible for him as for you. Sudden death may not be bad for those who die. But we pray against it, I expect, for the sake of the living. Was nobody there who might have saved him?"

"Nobody. He was quite alone. He generally rode alone unless I went with him. He had taken his luncheon, as he often did, and we were not alarmed till nightfall. But the night came, and the morning, and no sign of him. Then men went into the hills and an alarm was raised. But not until another day and night had passed did three of the searchers find him and his horse dead together under a great cliff called La Sporta dell' Aquila."

"None could have saved him?"

"Oh, no. He had fallen three hundred feet or more."

"You have my deepest, affectionate sympathy, Miss Bewes. It is, indeed, a sad story. I only hope you had good friends beside you to help you in those cruel hours."

She did not answer, and he guessed why. Thoughts of what followed and her own loss in love naturally kept the girl silent and he spoke again.

"Italy for you, then, is a land of grief, I fear. But do not shirk it, my dear. Face it again when the opportunity offers. You will very possibly find that the very scenes which brought such sorrow may be the only ones to restore you to happiness in time to come. Nature has many mysteries of that sort hidden in her heart for men and women."

She smiled at his earnestness; but he knew that she was liking what he said and feeling his friendship genuine. Indeed, his heart went out to her.

"I go to Italy every year with my uncle; but not there," she answered. "I couldn't go there. Uncle Burgoyne has a house at Florence, and he loves Italy, and I am pretty happy, because there are pictures there I always go to see. There's a picture by Andrea—Andrea del Sarto—that puts me in mind of my mother; and another—a Fra Bartolomeo—a dead Christ, that always brings my precious father back to me—not sadly—not very sadly. We are going there in a month or six weeks. Somebody has died whom Uncle Burgoyne knew, and there will be a sale, and he must buy some things."

Ringrose led her away from the subject as they met Lord Brooke.

It was now the luncheon hour and presently his lordship speculated humorously on what Mrs. Campbell might be deciding about the Goldoni.

"Something tells me," he declared, "that the lady is adamant and will refuse my offer. I feel it in my bones."

He was right. An uncompromising telegram reached Mr. Ringrose, while the little party was drinking tea later in the afternoon, and they learned that the owner of the Goldoni declined Lord Brooke's offer.

He considered a while, but committed himself to no further proposal. Two hours would now determine the detective's visit to Brooke-Norton, and presently when his host had withdrawn—to reflect, as he said, upon the ivory—and Mildred Bewes and young Tremayne had passed into the garden, John availed himself of leisure and did not immediately prepare to depart. His bag would be packed for him and there was nothing calling for special thought until Lord Brooke returned. His lordship had asked for no more than twenty minutes' reflection. It was clear that he little liked losing the ivory.

And now the visitor repaired alone to the gallery, where a thousand treasures lay upon their velvet settings. He desired again to see the piece that had startled him on the occasion of his first inspection, and soon he found it and gazed at the hideous little monstrosity, which, in exaggerated shape and different surroundings, was already so familiar.

For the ivory showed him whence had come the inspiration for that instrument of torture responsible for a child's death. The abomination, shrunk to the size of a marble, glared up at him, with an added venom that the drawing of Mrs. Bellairs had lacked and his own hideous puppet had scarcely achieved, although to these had been added size and colour. The genius of a mediæval artist, labouring in days when Satan was a more terrific personage than now, had put his dream of a fiend into the ivory. The



repellent thing indicated with absolute certainty the inspiration that had destroyed young Ludovic Bewes.

Ringrose was quick to appreciate the value of such evidence. He regretted for a moment the fact that he had destroyed his own dummy; but knew that the drawing made by his friend at the Old Manor House remained safe, to testify if the time ever came when he needed it. But circumstances had opened a wider vista of late, and suspicions of great possibilities haunted the detective's mind. They were not unreasonable, and what he certainly knew brought the larger and more tremendous hint within the region of likelihood. They promised, however, to be vital now; because, if time justified the hypothesis, his own course of action must embrace a far wider scope and a more extended examination of the past than he had bargained for.

Nevertheless, the new theory presented opportunities for action and John was before all else a man of action. Legally to prove the murder of Lord Brooke's nephew now promised an achievement of colossal difficulty, and his own failure with Arthur Bitton complicated the situation and decreased any chance of success. But if the thing that Ringrose began to conceive as possible were true, then the case might be pursued on more fruitful lines. That, however, was only a remote chance and could not be said to offer much material for hope. He reflected somewhat after this fashion as he stood bending over the case of ivories; and then suddenly he received a shock, the significance of which increased in importance with the days that followed.

Somebody had entered the gallery on silent feet and was watching him; but, absorbed in thought,

the visitor knew it not until a voice spoke at his ear. He turned, stood upright and looked round into the face of Lord Brooke. The young man wore rubber-soled shoes and it seemed for a moment that he had stalked Ringrose; but he only laughed at the detective's surprise.

"That vile thing has a horrid fascination for you, Fordyce," he said. "It is rather creepy. They believed in the devil in those days—eh? He was an inspiring force to good conduct and a joy to the artist. Alas! He's gone. You'd never find a sculptor to put all that passionate hideousness into the Prince of Darkness in our time. Spinello's "Lucifer" in the altar piece at Arezzo is not more hideous, yet the Prince of Darkness himself called on the painter to protest at the libel! Barthel of Dresden is responsible for those ugly little monsters you are looking at. He excelled in animals and evidently believed in the Deuce. A hellish pair—eh?"

"They are—especially the right-hand one," declared John, indicating the fiend which did not interest him. It was malignant, also, and full of evil; but it lacked the abominations of the other.

Ringrose, not desiring to run the risk of meeting any old Bridport acquaintance, had asked if a motor-car might convey him some few miles beyond the town to the main line, where the loop joined it. Thus he would enter the express from Weymouth direct for London. Now he reminded Lord Brooke of his request.

"That is arranged," answered the other. "I'm only sorry you should have had all this trouble for your pains. I'm much disappointed, too."

But John detected a faint difference in his lordship's manner. He appeared serious for once, though whether, indeed, disappointment at the loss of the Goldoni, or some deeper cause inspired his change of tone, he could not know. The cloud passed and Lord Brooke soon rattled on as usual; but a disturbing fact remained: he had seen his visitor interested in a carving that, for the owner of it, could not fail to possess tremendous significance.

"You're not going to buy Mrs. Campbell's ivory, my lord?"

"Even now I haven't quite decided. I want it rather badly; but it's a very stiff price."

"I wish I could pleasure you. It seems to me that you are generous; but the old lady evidently won't budge. I'm astonished rather, for she's not well to do, though not actually needy."

"Well, my offer's open."

They talked of indifferent subjects and left the gallery, while Ringrose repeated his sense of obligation and his great appreciation of the hospitality and friendship he had received.

Then came the moment for departure and the big car, destined to take him on his way drew up at the entrance. Bidding the chauffeur wait five minutes, Lord Brooke absented himself and left his niece and Nicholas Tremayne to chat with the departing guest. Then came a surprise, for his lordship presently returned bearing a piece of paper.

"Fork out, and be damned to Mrs. Campbell!" he said. Then he handed to Ringrose a cheque for one thousand pounds.

John, who carried the ivory in his breast pocket,

laughed and instantly produced it; while half a minute later his host shook him by the hand and bade him farewell.

They looked for a moment into each other's eyes, and behind the younger's cheerful expression and jesting words there seemed to lie a question, a doubt, a challenge. John saw them and felt them.

"Good-bye, Mr. Fordyce. Shall we meet again on this wide-wayed earth, I wonder?"

Lord Brooke put his question with a smile, and Ringrose, thanking him once more for a greeting so amiable, ventured heartily to hope they might do so. Beneath the civilities of the parting he perceived that much was concealed; but its nature he could only surmise. He weighed the situation when, an hour later, he sat in the London train.

Two facts faced him, and he knew that one had arisen out of the other. The first occurred in the gallery, where he had been surprised examining the Barthel carving. From that moment the owner of the collection had subtly modified—not his agreeable manner—for he gave no sign; but the spirit behind it. Ringrose understood that his interest in the hideous ivory had created a deep impression on Lord Brooke's mind. From courteous indifference and frankness, the young man had certainly indicated another emotion. It might have been unconscious, for it appeared in a mental gesture so shadowy that few would have observed it. Indeed, John felt very sure Lord Brooke himself was unaware of the manifestation. He would not wittingly have revealed any such thing. But from that moment an interest—a doubt and a question—hung for him over the personality of the



amusing commercial traveller. John well knew that uneasiness had been created in Lord Brooke's understanding, and the young man could not conceal it from one who was so keenly alive to the possibility of having created it. For Ringrose appreciated what that Barthel ivory must mean to the owner. From this horrible thing he had been inspired to create a monster well fitted to destroy any immature intellect; and now—suddenly—after the passage of safe years—to find a stranger deeply studying the original model, might well have made the criminal reflect, even though it did not make him fear.

Arthur Bitton was dead and Lord Brooke knew it. He knew, moreover, that his valet had destroyed himself under peculiar circumstances, and Ringrose guessed that his old master had been both deeply interested and relieved by Bitton's end. The removal of his instrument could not fail to be a source of satisfaction; but the mystery attending his death must have awakened a strong desire to learn particulars concerning it. What more probable than that Lord Brooke had pursued his inquiries through an obvious source and endeavoured to learn from Jane Bitton all that the widow could tell him?

And what could she tell him? She was a sane, well-balanced woman, and after her husband's death would be able to give a very coherent picture of his gradual demoralisation, his descent from cheerfulness and contentment to misery, his dread of night, his manifold terrors. And the details must be very clearly cut in Jane's mind, for they were vivid and had happened in such sequence that she could not fail to remember every circumstance. From those details and any

succinct narrative, the name of Bitton's friend, Alec West, would by no means be excluded. Her husband's downfall and death synchronised with the coming of Mr. West; and after the valet perished by his own hand, the unknown "gentleman's gentleman" had himself suddenly departed. From Jane Bitton, Lord Brooke might learn what manner of man was Alec West, and he would certainly be informed how Bitton's first collapse occurred in the company of West, how his second shock was also in West's lodging, and how his lonely death had happened on a night when his wife was absent from him. Lord Brooke must surely hear how the new friend had condoled with Jane and then disappeared, to be seen no more.

Now Ringrose, until the present, had not sufficiently considered these possibilities, and on his visit to Brooke-Norton, knowing that it would at least extend over many hours, had made no efforts at disguise. With some modifications he had been himself—an easy, genial man of the world, prepared to be taken or left, but conscious of his own power to make friends in any order of society. He had adapted himself to unfamiliar company and created the pleasant impression he was used to create. But if Lord Brooke had been at the trouble to ask Jane Bitton questions concerning the man so strangely identified with her husband's tribulations, then it was certain that Mrs. Bitton must have described one exceedingly easy to associate with "Mr. Norman Fordyce." He had dressed differently, and he had removed the little side whiskers of Alec West; but, saving an altered touch in his bearing and an element of courtesy and deference absent from his association with Bitton,

John had conducted himself alike to both, only suiting his speech and actions to the companionship of each.

That Lord Brooke could associate him for a moment with Bitton's acquaintance was, of course, impossible until the incident of the ivory; but Ringrose now saw that in a mind so swift and observant—a mind, also, to which the carving must mean so much—his interest in the ivory might well have awakened a wonder that strengthened into suspicion when linked with the circumstances of Bitton's death. But did any sure reason exist for supposing that such suspicion had been awakened? Could Ringrose honestly point to anything that followed the chance meeting in the gallery which indicated such a danger? He could; and in that conviction appeared the second very significant act on Lord Brooke's part before the motor-car left Brooke-Norton. The collector had decided against paying the price demanded for Mrs. Campbell's Italian curio. It was quite clear that, while willing to meet the lady at any time if she changed her mind, his lordship had no present intention of paying a thousand pounds for the Goldoni. Yet, at the very last moment, he changed his mind and wrote the cheque.

There was, indeed, a possibility that he had held off in hope that he might be met; but a second thought shattered this chance, because Ringrose was not the owner and had possessed no power to abate the price. He asked himself why Lord Brooke had changed his mind, and believed he saw the reason.

By purchasing the ivory he had for ever finished with Mr. Norman Fordyce. If all were straightforward,

the commercial traveller must now vanish from Lord Brooke's sphere and never re-enter it. By purchasing the ivory, all links with the go-between ended. Had he done otherwise, it might have lain in John's power to appear again, proceed with further bargaining and carry on the acquaintance. But that was not possible now; and if Norman Fordyce re-appeared in Lord Brooke's life, the latter would know that reasons existed for his so doing far deeper than those represented by Mrs. Campbell's treasure.

If such ideas had passed through the mind of the murderer, then undoubtedly suspicion existed in it. Lord Brooke would be alert, and at the shadow of John's re-appearance he must take instant alarm. Ringrose was a realist and knew that reality imposes very stern limits on those who follow his profession. To deceive as to his identity a man of such obvious competence and shrewdness as the master of Brooke-Norton was quite beyond the detective's power. Only in romance may secret agents disguise themselves and re-appear, to their victim's confusion, in a dozen transformations. He had seen and spoken with his opponent at close quarters, and he knew exceedingly well that when next they came to close quarters, disguise of a nature to delude Lord Brooke would be impossible. He must meet him once more as "Norman Fordyce," if he met him at all; but it remained to be seen whether any future meeting were necessary. At the bottom of his heart, however, John well knew that they would meet again; and probably do so long before he attained his object. But other matters needed first to be investigated, and upon these he now prepared to concentrate. Until a future time he



was entirely concerned with the past, and suffered what should follow to occupy his thoughts no more.

His determination remained unchanged; to bring a very great villain to punishment.

## CHAPTER XIII

### DOCTOR CONSIDINE

IN ten days' time John Ringrose was on his way to Italy. Not often could he combine business with pleasure; but now the opportunity offered, and he desired to investigate certain chapters of the past on the wondrous and beautiful spot where they had been written. He hoped not much from the medical man who, having been engaged to Mildred Bewes, subsequently changed his mind and married the wealthy American; but he had been at pains to learn that the gentleman still practised at Menaggio, for when taking a room at the Hotel Lario in that little town he inquired if an English physician were available, and was informed that Dr. Ernest Considine, of London, attended the hotel.

John knew the Italian lakes and very well remembered an important case which had held him on Maggiore for a month and taken him to Como also. To Lugano, therefore, he came, through the St. Gothard Tunnel, rested a couple of days, renewed acquaintance with the fair scenes of the neighbourhood, then took steamer and train and so descended to Menaggio and the comfortable accommodation there awaiting him. As Mr. Norman Fordyce he arrived, and found not a

few of his compatriots taking their pleasure upon the lake and the golf course spread above it on a plateau under the mountains.

But the morning after his arrival the traveller kept his room, declared himself suffering from a slight chill and sent for the doctor. He was in reality well enough, and held this the simplest and swiftest manner of setting about his business. John never wasted time in imagining the person and quality of a stranger before he met him; but we all unconsciously create some vision of those with whom we are to come in contact, and the appearance of his physician belied any suspicions concerning him that the patient might have entertained.

A tall, fair man, with a face tanned by the southern sun, appeared before his patient. He was slightly and gracefully built, with delicate hands, and a slim figure. Clear blue eyes and a small, amber-coloured moustache distinguished him, and his voice was deep, but of a modulated and pleasant tone. His manner, though not gloomy, exhibited restraint. Refinement and good breeding marked him. His manners were courteous and gentle; but John Ringrose marked in him a certain listlessness of demeanour which seemed foreign to his age. For he looked no more than five and thirty, and the pretended patient doubted if he were so much. His expression was frank; his eyes could sparkle when he talked, though he would not let himself go, and his smile never ended in a laugh. Doctor Considine was clad in a dark-grey lounge suit and wore a black tie. He listened to his patient's suspicions and imaginary pains, felt John's pulse, sounded him, took his temperature and reassured him.

"There is nothing to bother about," he said. "A little muscular rheumatism probably, and in twenty-four hours you ought to be all right. I'll see you again the day after to-morrow if you like, Mr. Fordyce; but I don't think you'll want me. Go and sit in the garden and get an appetite for lunch."

They chatted, and Ringrose found himself in the presence of an agreeable and ingenuous companion. Indeed, doctor and patient suited each other.

"Not related by any chance to Considine and Prothero, the bullion merchants?" asked Mr. Ringrose genially, inventing a firm for the occasion; and the young man shook his head.

"Not related to anything so exciting," he answered. "I come of a Derbyshire family."

"And an old one, I warrant," said John, who was leading to a question.

"So old that we are nearly extinct," answered the doctor. "Very few of us are left now. I have no near relatives."

"Then it's up to you to give the family a lift and look after the next generation," declared Ringrose heartily. He had exhibited the necessary psychological relief on learning there was nothing the matter with him. But his jest ended the interview and brought a shadow to the other's face.

"I shall not marry," he answered quietly. Then he extended his hand.

"Good-bye. Be sure the Italian sun is all the physic you need," he added. "We shall meet, however, for I take my meals at the hotel and my home is only a hundred yards away. I practise here through the season and, in six weeks' time, go north to Aix."



"I'm more than obliged, doctor," replied the patient, "and glad to meet you. If sometimes you'll take pity on a lonely man and give me the pleasure of your company, I shall appreciate it."

"Be sure I will, and glad to do so," answered the doctor; then he went his way; while ten minutes later John, in a new Panama hat, was sitting smoking a cigar under the great pine which dominated the garden. As usual, he marshalled his thoughts quickly and traversed the little information that he had gleaned concerning Considine at Brooke-Norton.

"I heard that he had thrown over Miss Bewes after her father's death and married an American with cash. And from whom did I hear it?" he asked himself. "I heard it," he continued, "from young Nicholas Tremayne; and he had heard it from the girl's uncle, Lord Brooke. Now Brooke may have heard it from somebody else; which seems improbable, since it isn't true, or he may have invented it, which is much more likely."

During the next day or two he saluted the doctor, when they chanced to meet, and no more. He proclaimed himself as well again and made a few elderly acquaintance in the hotel. Ernest Considine he found to be popular. The young man spent but a brief while over his luncheon and had plenty to occupy him in his practice by day; but during the evening he generally dined with this or that party among the guests, and Ringrose perceived that he was always willing to help visitors with his local knowledge and assist any who desired information concerning excursions and holiday pleasures on the lake, or among the mountains.

John asked the doctor to dinner presently, and after entertaining him handsomely, proposed a stroll. The night was cool, following upon a very hot day; the fire-flies flickered in the gardens and upon the margins of the water; while overhead sheet lightning flashed and faint thunder rolled above the mountains. The detective had ascertained, from another source, that a certain handsome villa a hundred and fifty feet above the lake level once belonged to the late Lord Brooke, though now in occupation of Italian tenants. He proceeded in that direction and, seeing the place brilliantly lighted up, pointed presently to it and declared how he had admired the mansion by daylight on a previous stroll. In the woods beneath, a little shrine stood at the junction of two stone-paved pathways, and here the men sat with their cigars and watched the lightning while Ringrose admired the villa.

His praises won information, though it was not readily given. Considine, indeed, seemed uninterested in the place; but at length he offered an opening for which the other manœuvred.

"Who owns the lovely house?" John asked, after he had expressed his admiration.

"Count Barotto."

"A patient I hope?"

"Oh, yes—a rare good chap, with a wife and half a dozen youngsters."

"Handed down, of course, from father to son?"

"No; Villa San Martino only changed hands two years ago. An Englishman used to own it—Lord Brooke."

The chance had come.

"Lord Brooke!" exclaimed John. "Not the ivory maniac?"

"No—he it was who got rid of the villa after his brother died."

"Of all odd men, that young man is surely the most remarkable," declared Ringrose, and under the darkness he knew that Considine felt interest.

"Do you know him, Mr. Fordyce?" he inquired.

"I do and I don't, doctor. Of course I don't belong to his rank of life; and yet I have enjoyed his hospitality and actually spent a couple of days under his roof. Not so long ago, either. You may wonder why, and I'll tell you if you'd care to hear. You know him also?"

"Yes; I know him. When his brother died, Mr. Burgoyne Bewes, as he was then, spent some time here looking after affairs."

Ringrose entered on his story, but told it in the character of Norman Fordyce and merely related the incident of the Goldoni ivory. He gave a humorous description of the visit to Brooke-Norton and dwelt upon the amusing side of his experience. On the delicate subject of Miss Bewes he said nothing at first, since Considine himself was the object of her shattered romance; but he dwelt upon Lord Brooke's idiosyncrasies and character, spoke of Nicholas Tremayne and described his lordship's ultimate decision and final purchase of the curio. Ernest Considine listened quietly, and when the story was told, John added, as an unimportant afterthought, an allusion to the girl.

"There was a charming young lady there, too, and very nice she was to me, though she doesn't come

into the yarn. A Miss Mildred Bewes—a niece of Lord Brooke, I suppose?”

“Yes, the daughter of the late lord.”

Then Ringrose proceeded.

“I’m the last to interest myself in other people’s business, doctor, and maybe, from what Mr. Tremayne told me, this is delicate ground. But, mind you, I judge people by themselves—not by what others may say about ’em, and one side of a story’s only good till you’ve heard the other.”

“I cannot guess to what you refer, Mr. Fordyce.”

“You knew Miss Bewes, maybe?”

“Knew her!”

Something like a strangled sigh followed and Considine threw away his cigar.

“I knew them all,” he continued quietly. “I was their family physician and attended Lady Brooke through her last, sad illness. I enjoyed the closest possible friendship with the late Lord Brooke, and was privileged to possess his complete confidence and affection. He was a grand man, Mr. Fordyce.”

“Anything like his brother?”

“As different as it is possible to imagine two men. He hadn’t got the present Lord Brooke’s brains, I suppose; but in my judgment he was worth a thousand of him.”

“Not like him?”

“Utterly unlike in appearance and mind. And yet my friend was a rare good brother to my certain knowledge. The late Lord Brooke was a big man—athletic and amazingly powerful. He fought with the Scots Guards in the war and gained distinctions. He was a big-hearted, generous chap—worshipped on



the countryside here. He first rented and then bought the estate and villa for his wife, because she felt better and happier at Menaggio than anywhere. His devotion was wonderful. I never saw such love; and when she died, life practically ended for him. He seemed to die with her, in a way."

"And didn't long survive, I suppose?"

"Not two years."

"Miss Bewes in chatting with me—for she took to me, I think, and I greatly admired her beauty and gentle character—in chatting with me, she mentioned a brother, who had also died."

"Yes—young Ludovic. He only survived his father a year, I believe."

"An awfully sad fate for the girl—to have all her family snatched away."

"It was."

"Smoke," said John. "I may tell you that this interests me a good deal. Frankly, Miss Bewes rather haunted my mind, doctor. She's devoted to her uncle, but the child didn't seem happy. Take a cigar and don't wish me at the devil."

Mechanically Considine helped himself from the other's case, and John, striking a light for him, continued:

"I'm a great believer in chance, Doctor Considine. In my experience chance often plays a very friendly part in the affairs of mortal men. We only hear of its pranks and its cruelties; but, believe me, I've known cases when chance was a good angel."

"The Greeks made a goddess of her," answered Considine. "What are you coming to, Mr. Fordyce?"

"Something exceedingly delicate; and if you so

much as lift your finger I'll shut up. But I'll tell you what you may or may not know already. The melancholy of the young woman struck me, and I also observed, without difficulty, that Nicholas Tremayne, of whom I spoke, was deeply attached to her. Indeed, he made no attempt to hide the fact. A very decent, English young fellow with plenty of good sense and no side. I ventured to ask him why she was so sad, and he hinted at her family history, which you have just told me; but he didn't stop there. He knew something else. Shall I go on?"

"By all means."

"Cigar out again. Well, Tremayne had learned from Lord Brooke that somebody on Como—a physician, to be plain—had won the affection of the girl and, after her father's death, jilted her. Is that true?"

"True! Good God!" cried the other, starting up. "He heard that from her uncle?"

"From Lord Brooke—yes. Who was this faithless begger? Perhaps, when the girl's father died her prospects changed and the suitor cried off?"

Considine did not immediately answer. He leaped from his seat beneath the shrine and walked up and down swiftly for some few moments. He was deeply moved. In the wide flashes of sheet lightning John caught momentary glimpses of his face, and utmost confusion, passion and misery sat upon it. The detective remained silent and presently Doctor Considine returned to his side.

Then Ringrose spoke again.

"Look here," he said. "If I'm trampling on your feelings or doing you a bad turn, or reviving painful memories, or anything like that, be frank and tell me

so. I didn't associate you with my yarn; but being reminded of the story by this accident of names and so on, it struck me that you might know who the man was and if anything could be done."

"I know who the man was exceedingly well," answered the other, his deep emotion obvious in his voice. "For the reason, Mr. Fordyce, that I am the man. I was engaged to Mildred Bewes, and it was she, not I, who broke off our engagement when she returned to England after her father's death."

"Doctor," said John, "will you put yourself into my hands in this matter? There's a Providence moving here, and I'm an experienced man of the world and want to help you. My motives are not wholly altruistic, as you shall hear. But I wish you well, and I wish that girl well. Do you trust me?"

"Why not? But—but——"

"Tell me exactly how things happened. But listen first. At the present time Miss Bewes is under the impression that, in plain words, you jilted her; while apparently you regarded and still regard yourself as the injured party. Now give me details, provided you are willing that I should help you."

"If what you tell me is true I must help myself, Mr. Fordyce."

Utmost determination and a grim fighting note accompanied the assertion. Considine was knit up. For a full minute he remained silent and appeared to have forgotten his companion. Then he turned to Ringrose.

"This looks like a bit of blackguard wickedness," he said.

"Possibly; but don't run to conclusions too quickly.

Listen to me. It is possible that explanations exist which you don't guess at. Women change their minds and then are sometimes sorry, too late, that they have done so. I think myself you are right, doctor. I do believe that you and she are the victims of deliberate interference; but I'm not sure. I earnestly advise you to let me help you; but that's entirely a matter for your own judgment. If you are prepared to invite my aid, however, I'll ask you, for a start, to tell me the exact circumstances that led to the split. As you like, of course; but I know rather more than I've told you yet, and two heads will be better than one."

Considine considered. Then he acted wisely.

"I must regard you as a friend," he said. "I know nothing whatever about you; but I think you mean her well and that's all that matters. Who could mean her anything else but well? I can tell you the little there is to be told in two minutes. She left here, with her brother and uncle, six weeks after her father's tragic death. It was understood that we should be married in a year's time—in England. I heard once from her and no more—a loving and affectionate letter. And that was the last.

"I wrote and wrote, receiving no replies. Then I wrote to her uncle, supposing him with her at Brooke-Norton. He was not, however. I found that he and she were at his villa in Florence. My letter home was forwarded to him there, and he came up himself from Florence to see me. He had business over the sale of his brother's estate in this place and stopped at the Hotel Lario for three days. Then he explained that Mildred had changed her mind about me. She was



very young and her father's death had unsettled her mind, and she wanted to begin a new life, with nothing to remind her of the past, and so on. It sounded reasonable in a sort of damned way. The man—Burgoyne Bewes as he was then—couldn't have been more decent about it. He let me down as gently and kindly as possible. He was awfully sorry for me and swore he'd done everything he could to show the girl she was making a mistake. He wanted her to marry me. He wished the thing to go through and believed that she would have been happy with me. I liked him; I appreciated the kindness that he showed me and the apparent sympathy. And I believed him. How could I choose but believe him? And now I want to break his accursed neck, Mr. Fordyce!"

"A natural ambition, doctor. You may live to gratify it. I think I see at least one painful shock for him; but you must move with the utmost circumspection. He is a very clever man, and if he does not want you to marry his niece, which seems pretty clear, you will find the path of true love somewhat uneven. You trust me, you say?"

"I do. But I repeat this is a case for trusting myself."

"And for trusting Miss Bewes. You must think of her first. Things are happening to her. We have got to move quite as quickly as you wish, and when you know me better, you'll find I'm not a laggard. Now it's understood that you trust me; and to show you trust me, I'll ask you to change the subject entirely and walk back to the hotel. The air grows chilly and those clouds mean rain. When do you go on your rounds?"

"I start at nine."

"Then I'll breakfast with you at your place to-morrow at half-past seven."

"I shall be very grateful if you will."

"You'll do nothing meanwhile?"

"I promise."

## CHAPTER XIV

### ON THE MOUNTAINS

PUNCTUALLY Ringrose joined Considine next morning, ate an omelette, drank some exceedingly good coffee and proceeded with his inquiry.

"I see by your eyes that you haven't slept," he began, "and you've cut yourself shaving; but don't be impatient. I'm first going to ask for some information respecting your friend, the late Lord Brooke. We shall come to your interests later on. For the moment they won't occupy me. Now last night you used a word concerning his lordship's death that Nicholas Tremayne also used at Brooke-Norton. The word was 'tragic.' Can you tell me what there was in any way tragical about it?"

"He went out for one of his rides in the hills and did not return. He was a great horseman and, after his wife's death, confided to me that only when in the saddle could he find distraction. He was riding an old, sure-footed 'whaler' he got in India. There's a place called La Sporta Dell'Aquila—roughly translated, The Eagle's Larder—under Monte Galbigha between Como and Lugano. It's a lofty, narrow plateau with precipices on either side; and beneath the north end of that we found him and his horse.

They had gone over together."

"An extraordinary accident to overtake an accomplished rider. Something frightened the horse no doubt?"

"It was supposed that the horse had been alarmed and run away on that narrow spur—certain death, of course. But—I speak in the very strictest confidence, Mr. Fordyce—the true explanation was otherwise. The 'accident' was no accident really. My friend took his own life."

John Ringrose bent his head.

"That, then, was the tragedy?"

"Yes; but I beg you will never speak of it, or whisper a word of it, for many reasons. Very few know it, and the truth was kept from the authorities and from Lord Brooke's children. I took the responsibility of that before his brother arrived; and he agreed that I had done rightly."

"Give me all particulars, doctor."

"He was found at the foot of The Eagle's Larder by three men, and I happened to be one of them. There could be no manner of doubt that he had ridden over on his horse; the two lay together after falling three hundred feet. There had been no struggle at the top. One could see where the turf and earth were marked by the hind legs of the horse as he felt himself falling. That was all. Fifty yards distant from the edge, under a thicket of sumac trees, lay his lordship's luncheon basket—a little frail of wicker that carried the small meal he took on these occasions. He evidently had dismounted and smoked a cigar, for we found the stump of it. But he had not partaken of his meal."



"The place was searched carefully?"

"Both above and below with utmost care. Only three men knew that he had committed suicide—myself and two young fellows from the hotel—visitors, who assisted me in my search. We came upon him together and I made them promise me not to reveal the fact. Perhaps I was wrong, Mr. Fordyce; but I took that step."

"Why?"

"For this reason solely. For the sake of his boy and girl. They were a sensitive pair. They adored their father, and even the little lad seemed to know all that Lord Brooke had lost when their mother died. They tried so hard to make it up to him, as far as they could do so. And, indeed, they succeeded. He was tenderly attached to them—to the boy, if possible, more than the girl. The boy was very like his mother. He reflected a measure of her beauty and inherited her excitable temperament."

"We will speak of them presently, doctor. I am deeply interested in them also. But tell me now exactly what you felt, when you discovered that his lordship had destroyed himself. It surprised you?"

"For a moment it astounded me. Indeed, had not the proof been under my eyes, I should hardly have believed it. Such a thing might have happened immediately after his wife's death, perhaps, though even then it would have been profoundly unlike Lord Brooke to yield to his sufferings in such a cowardly manner. But two years were passed; and though he would often speak to me with anguish of a loss that never grew dim, he held himself well in hand. He was a man of great self-control. There were his children,

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you see, and the boy's future was very much to him. He associated the little fellow so closely and directly with Lady Brooke, and often asked himself and me whether his plans for Ludo's future would have pleased her."

"So you were thoroughly startled at the terrible affair?"

"Startled—and puzzled. I could only explain it to myself by supposing the idea had long been nursed in secret, until the accident of finding himself alone on that dangerous place had caught him in a weak moment and driven him out of life. I made the two young men with me promise not to mention the vital evidence, and they saw the point and were sporting chaps and never did so. The inquest, therefore, went the usual way, and it was generally believed, and always will be, that his lordship met with a fatal accident."

"You told nobody else of the evidence to the contrary?"

"One man only; and he commended me and has always kept the secret. The present Lord Brooke. I felt it my duty to tell him. Sometimes I wish I hadn't; but I did."

"It was a most natural thing to do. Were the brothers on good terms?"

"The best possible. Burgoyne Bewes felt very much upset about it. Lord Brooke had been a rare good brother to him, as I knew. I was very intimate with my late friend and he used to tell me about his brother's escapades. Burgoyne lived for one thing—his ivories—and used to get into awful messes for money. Then he'd vanish and come to his brother for



cash. And he never came in vain. Lord Brooke was attached to him and always responded to his appeals. Burgoyne Brooke remembered this and certainly did all that a man could do afterwards."

"What did he do?"

"He was a joint executor for one thing; and he looked after all business, of course; but he was extraordinarily decent to the boy and girl—like a woman with them."

"You felt kindly to Burgoyne Bewes?"

"More than kindly—then. Until you told me last night what had happened behind my back, I should have said a more honourable and decent man didn't exist. There was a great charm about him. He won everybody, and one thing is certain, his personal grief at the loss of his brother was genuine enough. I can testify to that."

"Tell me. He came in response to your telegram when the fatal thing happened?"

"Yes; and he brought an old family servant with him—a man called William Rockley—whom little Ludovic knew well. Rockley was a Brooke-Norton man and the children had known him from their infancy. When their father came to settle here, Rockley, grown old, went to Burgoyne Bewes at Florence and became his lodge-keeper at Villa Pia on the Arno. He may still be there. So their uncle brought Rockley to Menaggio, that Ludo might have him for a companion for the time. His own man came, too—a valet called Bitton. Then, after the necessary formalities, the present Lord Brooke travelled to England with his brother's body, which was buried in the family mausoleum at Brooke-Norton. After that he returned here

and, when everything was done and the Italian estates wound up, he went home again with Mildred and the boy."

"I see exactly how things fell out. Now one word about the heir; then I will ask you a very important question, doctor."

"The heir was, of course, the new Lord Brooke— young 'Ludo.' "

"Exactly. And what of him? Don't let my questions puzzle you. I'm not asking one that isn't important. What manner of lad was 'Ludo,' as you call him? "

"A healthy youngster, but not robust. He was like his mother—of a nervous temperament and highly strung."

"Difficult? "

"Not a bit. A cheerful boy and amiable and gentle, but excitable by nature—inquiring and imaginative."

"No mental weakness? "

"None. Physical nervousness was his trouble—a timid little chap and not physically brave. That bothered his father, who did not know what fear was; but I always told him the boy would outgrow it. He wanted to take drastic steps and shame Ludovic out of his fancied fears—keep him in a dark room at night and so on; but I explained that to do anything calculated to spoil his nerve, while he was still so young, would be a grave mistake."

"The boy wasn't weak-minded? "

"Far from it—a very clever, precocious boy. He only wanted patience and sympathy. He would have outgrown his childish dread of the dark very soon.

He had his mother's gift of dreaming—a little poet, in a way."

"Prone to people the night with fancied terrors and so on?"

"Exactly, Mr. Fordyce."

"His uncle understood this?"

"Perfectly. I impressed it upon him. He consulted me about Ludo, and I told him what the boy's father had intended to do. He wasn't sent to a preparatory school for Eton, though old enough. Instead, his father had just engaged a private tutor for him, when the end came."

"But the boy died?"

"Yes. I saw it in the newspapers. I had, of course, broken with the family by then."

Mr. Ringrose nodded. He did not desire to pursue that subject at the present time.

"Don't think I'm forgetting Miss Bewes," he said kindly. "You are very patient and will need to be much more patient yet, doctor; but it's well worth your while so to be. Now I'll ask you my important question and then let you have peace for the present. But you've got to do more than answer it. You have got to put yourself at my disposal at the earliest opportunity and devote several hours—how many you know better than I do—to an excursion that I must take—to-day, or to-morrow at latest. There may be a need for haste. At any rate I should deprecate delay. First the question: How did you know with such certainty that your friend, the late Lord Brooke, committed suicide?"

"In this way," answered Considine. "No horse would have gone over that cliff in daylight unless it

was running away, and the rider knew that. So he had tightly bandaged the horse's eyes with a scarf that he always carried. I removed it myself."

"What was the nature of the injuries?"

"His lordship's back was broken and both his legs. The horse must have turned over in the air. It was lying partly on his body."

"You conducted no post-mortem, of course?"

"No, Mr. Fordyce. We brought him in as best we could with help from some of the mountain men. The horse was buried on the spot. I insisted on that. He was very fond of the creature—a big, powerful, Australian-bred animal he had got from India."

The listener showed no further interest in these details.

"So much for that, then," he said; "and now what I want is to spend an hour in The Eagle's Larder. How far is it and can you accompany me? I should be very glad if you can make the time; but, if not, no doubt some trustworthy local man known to you could do it."

"I'll make the time willingly. Would to-morrow do? We'd start after noon and, since the days are long now, we should be back by ten or eleven at night—if you don't mind missing your dinner."

"Good! I can't walk so far, I expect. What about mules?"

"I was going to suggest mules. We'll take luncheon here, start at three, when I've finished my work, and be there by five or half-past. It's on the Lugano side, or we might take a train to Porlezza and ascend from there; but mules from here will be all right."

Thus they settled it, and for the remainder of that



day, John Ringrose left a sorely-puzzled but very excited physician to his own thoughts.

At the appointed time two powerful mules and a lean Italian awaited them, and soon the party had climbed out of Menaggio on the mountain roads to their destination.

Through a region of vine and mulberry and cherry, with steps of maize and corn growing among the trees, they ascended, then threaded a little pass, and so, beneath the shade of a chestnut forest, approached the foothills of Monte Galbiga. Anon the road was reduced to a narrow and stony track, that wound with increasing steepness upward. Above the woods, now sunk to bossy verdure beneath them, the limestone ribs of the great hills emerged in ridges, like the roots of a prodigious tree; the thickets dwindled and spaces of close green turf, gemmed with mountain flowers, extended beside the way. Here they halted awhile, rested the mules and gazed down on Como upon the eastern side of the great slope, and little Lake Piano, a tiny gem of jade-green water, far beneath them. Already Lugano glimmered away to the north-west.

Another hour of climbing brought the party to The Eagle's Larder. The strange formation was approached by two mountain tracks—one along the razor edge of a steep and precipitous ridge, the other from the valleys beside Lugano, a hairpin path of easier gradients.

But it was the stiffer ascent that challenged John Ringrose and his mule. He sat well forward over the great creature's shoulders and helped her as he could. To the summit at last they came without adventure and there took off the saddles, let the mules graze

and examined the scene. They stood in a small meadow surrounded and dotted with dwarf scrub of oak and sumac; while above these towered a wind-worn pine or two. The narrow plateau, of little more than five acres, was surrounded on two sides by tremendous precipices and to the south by a more gradual, but steep slope, where the stone lay in ledges scantily clothed with scrub of juniper, lavender and lesser herbs. This scree also terminated abruptly and the cliff beneath it curved inward. Poised in air below, two hawks wheeled and uttered shrill, plaintive cries, while upon the limestone ledges there grazed half a dozen black-and-white goats.

Doctor Considine indicated the scene of Lord Brooke's death.

"He must have ridden up by the easy climb," he said, "because a horse couldn't well come the way we did. He would have gone nearly to Porlezza, where the train for Menaggio from Lake Lugano starts, and then ascended here. This was where he met his death."

They stood presently above the eastern precipice beneath which three hundred feet of cliff fell sheer and stark into a narrow gorge beneath. Through this wooded glen a stream ran, and they could hear its murmur ascending in the mountain silence.

Having studied the summit of the plateau, John expressed a wish to descend to the spot where the dead man had been discovered.

"I attach importance to this," he said. "Can we get down?"

Considine knew of no way, but the muleteer was better informed. He showed them a descent, won by retracing their steps along the track they had already

ascended on the mules. They went down on foot, and a hundred yards lower, a path which they had not observed broke to their right and carried them swiftly to the bottom of the cliffs.

"My companions and I came up by the waterfall," explained Considine. "It was not till we found man and horse together here that we understood what had happened. The plateau itself was explored next day."

They stood beside a mound already hidden in herbage and weeds, where the dead "whaler" had been buried, and Ringrose found little to detain him. Now the hawks came and went above their heads—to vanish into their aerie high on the cliff face, reappear and speed away. They were bringing food to their nestlings.

The physician and his new friend returned by easy stages to the summit and there sat down, ate a light meal of fruit, dried figs, and walnuts, and drank a bottle of red wine. John then smoked a cigar and, declaring himself rested, proceeded to explore, while light still held and the west flamed in a gorgeous pageant of orange and lavender-coloured clouds. For an hour he examined the isolated meadow perched upon this mountain spur, and devoted to every feature an amount of attention that puzzled Considine.

They left The Eagle's Larder by the easier, northward track, for the dusk was down and the razor edge by which the mules had come needed good light. The extreme loneliness impressed Ringrose. This uplifted spot showed not a trace of man. Far below one roof-tree broke the wild, and from above, under the actual crown of the mountain, there rose thin, far-off, spiral feathers from the charcoal burners' fires;

but the little plateau itself—thrust out thus upon a tongue of stone—lay off the regular pathway of the mountain men and only a mile beneath, on the way down by the hairpin track, did they strike a more frequented thoroughfare. The return journey was not difficult, and at Grandola, where they arrived after dark, Ringrose declared that he would discard his mule and travel back to Menaggio by the last train.

“My leather is not used to these saddles,” he said, and presently their guide himself mounted and trotted off, leaving the others to wait until the little train from Porlezza should take them on their way.

For half an hour they sat and talked upon the railway platform.

“You’ll wonder what I’m after and the meaning of this day’s work, doctor,” said Ringrose.

“I’m wondering more about my affairs than yours,” answered Ernest Considine; “but it’s no good half-trusting a man. I’m in your hands, though seeing the nature of what you’ve told me, it’s devilish hard to explain why I’m loafing about here when I ought to be back in England getting to the bottom of this business and seeing her face to face.”

“That’s dead right, and I’m flattered by your confidence. If anything could make me feel keener to bring you and that young woman quickly together again, it would be the fact that you trust me so completely. But this is certain, so you can afford to wait a little longer. If Miss Bewes still loves you as well as you love her, and for my part I now feel no doubt of that, then you’re safe. The fact that she was separated from you by a lie is now beyond question, and if, while believing that you jilted her, she can still think



too well of you to be happy after this long passage of time, what will her feelings be when presently she knows that you love her still and never ceased to love her?"

"But Lord Brooke——" began the young man passionately, and John restrained him.

"Doctor," he said, "for the present leave Lord Brooke to me. You have a very just quarrel with that man; but, if I'm not gravely mistaken, the world has a much greater quarrel with him. I'm not going to deal in mysteries much longer. You trust me, and it is only fair that I should trust you; but there remains some very important grounds I must explore before I tell you all that I know. You're going to hear a story presently that will make your own affairs look small by comparison; and since, by the happiest accident in the world, I am able to promise that your own business must end prosperously—in a way to exceed your wildest hopes a week ago—then you must play the game with me and hold yourself in hand."

"I'm well content to—when I know the game, Mr. Fordyce," answered Considine.

"You'll know the game in three or four days at the outside. But it is important that you don't act on your own account, or for your own interests, until you do know the game. To-morrow I go to Florence, and I shall be there for a couple of days. If what I there discover is what I hope to discover, then it's uncommonly likely that you'll not only know the game, but find yourself called to play a part in it. And you needn't look away over the hills, as though you wanted to charter an airplane and take a bee line for Brooke-Norton, because it's more than possible that the next time that you see your sweetheart will be in Italy, not England."

## CHAPTER XV

MR. WILLIAM ROCKLEY

ON the following day John Ringrose left Menaggio for Florence, proceeding down the lake to Como and thence, by Milan, over the Lombardy plains and the Apennines. He arrived soon after midnight and took a room at the Minerva Hotel. The weather was hot, and Florence roasted even in the night. From his window at dawn John saw Giotto's magic campanile blossom like a flower upon the glory of the morning; then he rose, strolled through the Cascine, delighted in the green waters of the river, sparkling under the risen sun, and presently, walking beside it, sought out Lord Brooke's Italian dwelling. The Villa Pia faced south upon Lung Arno's broad, paved street, and the traveller marked signs of activity even at that early hour. Workmen were on the roof attending to some matter, and gardeners busy in a broad, formal patch of grass and border that extended before the face of the mansion. Orange and bay trees in tubs stood here waiting their places, and the beds were being planted with many flowers. A lofty gate of scrolled iron separated the entrance from the street, and on one side within it stood a lodge of one story. Ringrose knew Florence, but now he came to the city in a new

capacity. He had made his plans before leaving Menaggio and elaborated all details during the journey. He designed to seek physical proof of a mental conviction, and it was to secure material that should support his conviction he had come. Any ultimate and absolute proof that he was right seemed as yet, humanly speaking, impossible to reach, though the adventurer felt not daunted. Many tentative steps might yet have to be taken, but he continued to believe that, before the last, light on his supreme problem would be thrown.

He came now, not as "Norman Fordyce," to Florence, but for the moment chose to resume an earlier impersonation. It was necessary to establish friendly relations with the gatekeeper of Villa Pia, and a first glance at the activities in house and garden told him that the dwelling was being prepared for the arrival of Lord Brooke himself, or another. Hither now John Ringrose came in the old part of "Alec West," the friend of Arthur Bitton—a man who must be familiar to William Rockley; and his intention was to pretend such close confidences had existed between himself and Bitton that his new acquaintance would entertain no suspicion. How much might dead Bitton have told John now! But his lips were sealed and the detective could only hope that Rockley was equally familiar with certain facts he desired, before all else, to learn. He pushed an electric button beside the great gates, and in response a little man emerged from the lodge. He was very old and round in the back, with grizzled whiskers sprouting beneath a clean-shaven chin, a bald head and a humorous, wrinkled and cheerful countenance. His grey eyes were bright behind a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles,

and his small mouth had fallen in for lack of teeth behind it.

The little gatekeeper looked up at John and smiled cheerfully.

"An Englishman—eh? And what might you want, master?" he asked. "We're empty yet."

" 'Master' to you," answered the other genially. "I'm English all right, and so's Mr. William Rockley, by the looks of him. My name's Alec West, and I knew a poor friend of yours who went home a month or two ago in England. So, finding myself in Florence after a job, I remembered there was a fellow countryman at Villa Pia on the river and made bold to look him up."

Nothing could exceed John's heartiness of manner. He had picked up "Alec West" where he had dropped him. He was once more the retired gentleman's servant, and he came with a tale that, wearying of retirement, he intended going back to work, if the advertisement that he had arrived to answer met his need.

Mr. Rockley was very friendly. He shook hands, invited Ringrose into the shade of the lodge, and asked an obvious question.

"And who's the English friend who has passed away? I can't call to mind nobody."

"Perhaps 'friend' may be too strong a word," answered the other, "but he spoke of you as such, though maybe he liked you better than you liked him. Arthur Bitton was the man—him that died at Bridport under sad circumstances a while ago."

Rockley was much interested.

"You knew Bitton—eh? Then you can tell me a lot I'd like to hear."



"I knew him mighty well, and I knew his wife—a very nice party indeed. He was a curious sort of man and he had interesting things to tell me about his master, Lord Brooke. Hand and glove we got, while I was looking for a house down that way."

Ringrose perceived an element of jealousy in the old man's answer.

"Arthur weren't no friend of mine," he said, "I knew him well enough, but friends—no. I never could see why his lordship thought such a lot of that man. A good valet, no doubt, but never a friend of the family like what I was."

"He knew that. He gave you best there. You are one of the family yourself, so he said."

"I joined up at Brooke-Norton as a boot boy under the first lord's father, sixty years ago," said Mr. Rockley, "and when my breathing parts broke down, I came here, because Mr. Burgoyne, as he was then, wanted an Englishman at his gate. And Bitton came and went with his master—a slimy, secret customer I always thought him. However, he's dead. Took his life, I heard—along of marrying, no doubt?"

"Come and eat a bit of breakfast with me. Mister Rockley, and I'll tell you the story. It wasn't nothing to do with his wife. In fact, his death looked to be a mystery. He wasn't a talkative sort of man, but he opened out to me—about his master's adventures, and so on. If you're not busy, let's go and have a bite. I came out before the heat of the day. Only got here last night and must see these people at noon."

Mr. Rockley had, however, taken his morning meal.

"I'm watching the men now," he said, "but I'll do this. I'll meet you half after twelve and we'll have

a yarn and I'll take you to a nice place where I always go."

John agreed, chatted a little longer, created an agreeable atmosphere and then went back to the "Minerva" for breakfast. He indicated an air of supreme discontent when he met Mr. Rockley at the appointed hour. The old man had changed his clothes and carried a big green umbrella to shield himself against the sun

John confessed to a disappointment.

"I've had my journey for my pains," he said. "The chap's a South American, and devilish smart at that. No quarrel with him, but I can't leave Europe. I don't need to work, and if I do a bit more it will be with English or Scotch, Mr. Rockley."

"Quite right," answered the veteran. "A good many gentlemen's gentlemen go to America, however. I've met 'em touring with their masters. Americans don't make such good servants as us, because they are that independent and unaccustomed to obey any man. The black folk do the serving there, by all accounts."

Mr. Alec West soon established the closest relations with old Mr. Rockley. The elder liked to talk, and presently John discovered that his favourite subject was his master's family. Lord Brooke proposed to arrive during the following week, and old William hoped that Mildred Bewes could accompany him, but did not know for certain whether she would do so. In her centred Rockley's devotion. He had cared much for her father and he exhausted his adjectives in condemning the scoundrel, Doctor Considine, who had won Mildred's heart and afterwards thrown her over.

"I've seen him, mind you," said William. "When her father perished—falling over a precipice, poor gentleman—I went along with her uncle, for he knew I'd prove a godsend to them orphans. They'd known me since they was babes, you understand. And I comforted 'em till they went to England; and never did I see the boy again, for he followed his parents inside a year. And that blasted doctor—butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, and the poor girl adored the creature."

"Did you see through the rascal?" asked Mr. Ringrose.

"Not me! I'd have said he was as honest as myself. English, you understand, and nicely mannered, and a tower of strength at the time. But there it was; he'd plotted to fling her over, and so soon as she was gone, he did. A blessing in disguise, as the present Lord Brooke always said, because she was marrying beneath her and too young to know her own mind, perhaps. But a shameful thing and I hope he'll get his reward. Married an American lady for her money, so Lord Brooke discovered after."

John, by using the name of Arthur Bitton freely and pretending a close familiarity with the vanished valet, won Mr. Rockley's confidence. Much that he had gleaned for himself at Brooke-Norton he related as the information of the dead man, and he was able in some directions to give William glimpses of the life at home and information concerning Miss Bewes that pleased him. Subtly Mr. Ringrose created the impression of one as interested in the family as the old servant himself; and when, in due course, he approached the present Lord Brooke, and with knowledge—gleaned

from Considine rather than Arthur Bitton—laughed at his lordship's adventures and constant need of cash, William shared the laughter and dived into his memory for exactly those reminiscences the stranger most desired to traverse.

John insisted on standing treat, and over a second bottle of golden wine and a second Tuscan cigar Mr. Rockley inclined to become garrulous. He confessed that he had never cared for his present master as much as his elder brother, but he believed, now that he was elevated to the head of the family, Burgoyne Bewes had begun to steady down and behave worthily.

"A man that put his toys before everything in life," he said. "He'd buy rubbish till he didn't know how to pay the servants' wages; and then when the city was up in arms, you may say, and the brokers at the door, he'd vanish away and be no more seen till he'd got to his poor brother and knocked the needful money out of him. Off he'd fly, under a pretence, and change his name and his nation, and turn up now here, now there, to wait for supplies. And such was his cleverness and command of tongues that once he got out of Florence and slipped the authorities, they might as well seek a needle in a haystack as him."

John laughed.

"He'd even change his name, would he? So Bitton said."

"His name and his nation he'd change, and now he'd be a Frenchman, and now a German; and none was in the secret but me, of course; and wild hosses wouldn't have got it out of me."

"A lucky chap to have you to trust to."

"So he was then. I worked at this end and sent his



telegrams and so on and put his letters in new envelopes and forwarded 'em to his new name, so as he shouldn't be tracked."

"You knew where he was bound, of course?"

"Most times I did; and now he would be 'Herr Gortz,' and now he would be 'Monsieur Laurence Bonhomme,' and so on.

Mr. Ringrose roared with laughter and applauded the old man. He avoided direct questions until the critical matter of his inquiry. Indeed, he changed the subject presently and only by a serpentine route returned to it.

He spoke of himself and his journey home.

"Now I'm out here, I think to take a look at the famous lakes," he said. "You know all about 'em, no doubt?"

"A bit. I was on Como, of course—'tis thought to be very fine, but along of the family troubles I'd no eye for it. Then there's Lugano and the big 'un—Maggiore."

"I've heard tell about Lugano."

"Never was there, but Lord Brooke was now and again. You see that weren't too far off his brother; and more than once he bolted there and met his lordship as was. And to the town of Como he went one year, and to Milan also. He liked being hunted, I believe, same as they say a dog-fox do; but they never caught him!"

Again John laughed and changed the subject. It was so easy to manage William, that fine technique he felt wasted on this simple soul; but Mr. Ringrose proceeded as usual and created no suggestion that his interest might be peculiar.

"I'll see all three lakes," he said, "and there's another out Venice way by the name of Garda on the map. That looks a tidy lump of water, too."

But Mr. Rockley had never heard of Garda.

An hour or two passed pleasantly for the old man, and then, expressing his great gratification at meeting a compatriot who could offer such entertainment, John begged that they might meet again.

"I shall start on my way to-morrow night, I guess," he said, "and take your tip about the lakes. But I'd enjoy another yarn with you. What do you say to a bit of supper with me to-night at this place? We can't beat it."

Old William agreed. He was now getting very sleepy and declared his siesta overdue. But at nine that evening they met again and Ringrose traversed some old ground. He returned to the subject of Arthur Bitton, told William about the dead man's wife and asked questions concerning his past. Thus they drifted back to Mr. Rockley's favourite subject and he related with enormous detail the incidents that followed the death under Eagle's Larder.

"It must have sobered Mr. Burgoyne Bewes a lot," said John, now prepared to strike. "Were you along with him when the fatal news got here?"

"I was," answered William; "and it so happened that the news arrived before my master. A curious thing that. He was in one of his messes just a week before his brother passed away, and he'd nipped off over the mountains to Bologna. Bologna it was. He weren't going to Como that time—hadn't got enough ready money even for that. But he wrote, you see, to his brother from Bologna. And he got the stuff of

course, and came back bold as brass—to find the fatal telegram waiting for him. Yes, the telegram and the legal officers. They was in that time and I couldn't keep 'em out. But he'd got the money; and he wept about that after, for one of the last things his poor brother did was to give it to him."

"A cruel shock for all of you. And Arthur Bitton was with him at Bologna, of course?"

"Not that journey. Too hard up he was even to take his man. He dashed off by night, and I sent him a brace of letters next day in a big envelope to 'Harold Stebbings, Esquire, Hotel Cavour, Bologna.' And other letters I sent on after."

"My stars, Mr. Rockley, I wish I had your memory!"

"I don't forget nothing that happened around that time. He told me all about it later. Lord Brooke came down from Menaggio to Bologna and put it all right, and told him not to outrun the constable no more; and then he went home, and Mr. Burgoyne, with his pockets full of money, no doubt, went off to Venice for a couple of days after his toys. Then the telegram arrived—to say his brother was dead. It came the evening of the day they found him, and it weren't till the next morning that my master got back—to meet death and the bailiff's men. He soon got squared, and that same night set off with Bitton to Menaggio. And I followed them two days after."

John nodded.

"What you've been through in your time!" he said, and since his purpose was now changed, John devoted another hour to the old man and saw him home afterwards. Once the particulars that he had

come from Menaggio to learn were his, another very definite achievement demanded his attention, for he had thought very far ahead and had planned an extraordinary course of action, given certain conditions. Those conditions were now established. He had discovered what he suspected, and it had come to him with a minimum of effort on his part. But now that he knew Burgoyne Bewes was not actually in Florence when his brother died, it behoved him to proceed with a design already elaborated in that event.

The nature of his further intentions appeared on his return to Doctor Considine; but for the moment he was concerned, before leaving Mr. Rockley, to impress himself upon the old man's memory and leave a vivid picture of his visit and his inquiry. It might have been supposed that, once he had attained his object, the detective would have effaced himself, or perhaps even cautioned Mr. Rockley not to mention their chance acquaintance until he heard again, inventing some pretext for so doing. John knew that Lord Brooke was to be at his villa during the following week and it seemed improbable that the talkative old man would omit to mention him, as a friend of dead Arthur Bitton. But, instead of seeking to prevent this probability, Ringrose did all that he might to make a certainty of it. To the last they talked on the subject that most interested old William, and not until he had again returned to the lodge with Mr. Rockley and seen various photographs of the family did the visitor bid his companion good-bye.

He displayed deep interest in the pictures and was indeed genuinely challenged by one of them. The



wistful, gentle face of the murdered boy struck John into silence for a few moments. Then he returned to himself.

"I don't think, after all, I shall waste another day here, Rockley," he said. "I'll get along to Milan to-morrow morning and see about the blessed lakes later. And much I hope that if I'm ever this way again we shall meet."

The old man bade him a friendly farewell and they parted in time for Mr. Ringrose to set out even sooner than he intended. He caught the midnight train from Florence for the north, crossed the mountains, where nightingales sang and fireflies twinkled in the olive groves, and reached Bologna under a red dawn. But there he broke his journey.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE DOUBLE CROSS

ERNEST CONSIDINE dined with the detective upon the night after John's return to Menaggio; and when the meal was ended and they smoked and strolled beside the waters of the lake, Ringrose let the doctor into his secrets. The night was very still but bright, with a moon nearly full. Considine suggested his motor-boat, which he ran himself and was necessary to his practice, and John approving the idea, they soon slipped out into the moonlit waters. Then the engine was shut off and they floated out of earshot of the land.

"Now you've got to listen to some mighty startling words, doctor," began the elder. "Before you go ashore to-night you'll be up against the biggest horror of your life, and I want you to understand that I'm not inviting your opinion on a theory, I'm telling you. A very extraordinary thing happened to me last winter, and that was only the prelude to other extraordinary things; but the most extraordinary thing of the lot, perhaps, has still got to happen, if I can make it. You must first listen to what is past, and then to what I hope will follow."

"Go ahead, Mr. Fordyce."

"To begin at the beginning, then, my name's not

"Fordyce.' You see, I've decided to take you into my whole confidence, doctor, for two reasons. First because I like you and know you're trustworthy; secondly because it's going to pay you very well to be by my side. Perhaps I'd work single-handed if you weren't bound to be so much interested—I always prefer to do so. But you've got a pretty big crow to pluck with Lord Brooke yourself and you'll come in on the side of right."

"I want no man to help me against Brooke," said Considine shortly.

"Perhaps not; but I do. We'll go back to the starting point, doctor. My name's not 'Fordyce.' It's Ringrose—John Ringrose."

"Good Lord! The famous detective?"

"Retired. That's right. And last winter, being a free man, I went to a friend in Dorset for a bit of rough shooting; and there the game began."

John now told his tale with precision and clarity. He omitted nothing of importance and narrated every incident up to his departure from Brooke-Norton, after selling Mrs. Campbell's ivory to Lord Brooke. Then he briefly surveyed the whole situation and spoke first of Arthur Bitton.

"We'll tackle Brooke in a minute, but begin with the valet. You see how I was fixed when he went out of it. It wasn't a case for judging the witnesses before you judge the prisoner. That happens often enough, for the commonest crime committed on earth is perjury. But the witnesses—the ladies at the Old Manor House—were, as I believe, impeccable, and my prisoner, so to call him, judged himself. I banked on certain normal human traits and calculated that a

common instinct—to lessen one's own misery by sharing it with another—would presently develop in Bitton. It did: confession was on the tip of his tongue more than once—confession to me. Under other circumstances a man might have confided in his wife; but he was newly married, and I saw enough of their united life to judge he would come to me before her. I confessed to weaknesses and hinted at sins and let him see he had no saint to deal with. But I was all wrong. My theory of him may have been the right one; yet I utterly failed in my practice. I turned the screw too sharply; and the last twist defeated my own object and put him out of reach for ever. A bad failure, doctor, and I'm ashamed of it. We can leave that, and him. I shed no tears for Bitton. He did a damnable thing, and to get the truth out of them, I'd torture him, or any man, who could torture a child. But where was I when he dropped out? Just where I started. I had to begin all over again.

"Certain facts, of course, I'd got. I knew now that the story from the Old Manor House was true. I knew that Bitton had murdered little Lord Brooke, and I knew it had been done at the instance of the child's uncle. I knew Lord Brooke was guilty, but not one shadow of evidence remained on earth to prove it. There's always evidence, of course, for everything that happens; but, with Bitton gone, there was no evidence for me to put my hand upon. You may say I'd done his blackguard lordship a rare good turn by removing Bitton. I had, if I stopped at that. But I went on; I tackled Lord Brooke and I've told you what I did at Brooke-Norton, doctor. So now I come to the interesting part.



"Up to the present I had never bothered my head about your friend, the late Lord Brooke. If I'd been a sharper man, I might have done so much sooner; but I didn't. I'm a one-eyed sort of creature—more a mole than an eagle—and I can't see much farther than the point of my nose best of times. Synthesis, they call it. I've got no synthesis, unfortunately. But what happened? Why did I come out to see you and look into the death of the man out here? Because I was up against a brick wall and, despite my acquaintance with the present Lord Brooke, had still reached no further than when I started. I'd found, by pure luck, the ivory that had inspired the doll which frightened young Ludovic Bewes to death—that was all. And only one word brought me here. In speaking of Mildred's father, Nicholas Tremayne had referred to his death as 'tragic.' That's why I looked over the water and came here. I couldn't ask for particulars at Brooke-Norton. I couldn't create the idea that I was interested, even to Tremayne, because as likely as not he'd repeat our conversation to Lord Brooke. At this moment I won't swear that Brooke has not smelled a rat. He's quick as lightning in his mind, and we know conscience makes cowards of us all. It also sharpens the memory. He's not got a conscience—granted—but he's got a cast-iron memory, and I was sorry he saw me looking a second time at that devilish bit of bone in his collection.

"And now you hold tight, doctor, for I'm going to surprise you."

Considine made an inarticulate sound—half grunt, half groan. Then he spoke.

"Good God, you can't surprise me more than you

have. If angels from heaven had told me that seeming kindly, decent, sensitive man could murder a child——”

“A great comedian, doctor. I’ll tell you what I think of him presently. From my point of view he’s worthy of unlimited admiration—outside morals, you understand—like other heroes of his order. We must judge ’em on their own plane, like tigers, or foxes. But let me get on with it. I come to you and, incidentally, clear up your troubles and put heart into you again. That’s to the good, both for your own sake and for mine. And you tell me that your friend lost his life at Eagle’s Larder. The world regards it as an accident, and that’s tragedy enough; but you confide in me that it was no accident, because the sure evidences of suicide were only too apparent. And what do I find next? That the evidences of suicide were far from apparent, and that, coupled with what you relate about the dead man, they are not apparent at all.”

“They were absolute, Mr.—Mr. Ringrose.”

“Nothing is absolute, doctor. Suicide is nearly always a matter of circumstantial evidence. If you’d found Lord Brooke hanging from a tree, upon a yard of rope that he’d bought an hour before, you couldn’t be positive he’d destroyed himself. You can’t be positive that Arthur Bitton shot himself, for that matter.

“Now here’s a man who has had a great sorrow and got over it. He’s a brave, manly sort of man, with a good nerve, good sense and a kind heart. He understands his obligations and the duties that life has brought to him. Above all, the children of the wife he adored are growing up, and the boy—so

like his mother—is physically delicate and will want a father's care. The girl is safe we'll grant, because she's going to marry the man she loves, and her father entertains a high opinion of that man; but is the father going to throw over his little son? Is the father going to leave the fate of that delicate child at the mercy of a harum-scarum uncle, always up to folly and apparently quite irresponsible? For, if he killed himself, that's what the late Lord Brooke surely did. You told me there were no guardians appointed and no special provisions made for Ludovic till he came of age. Would his father have left it at that if he was going to die? No; therefore while an accident was possible, suicide is ruled out."

"And yet the fact remains that he destroyed himself. For how else did he die?"

"He died, Doctor Considine, at the hands of another man."

"But how—how? There are facts—a thousand facts to prove the contrary."

"There are no facts to prove the contrary. I may tell you that the moment I heard your story of the late Lord Brooke's death, I knew my own intuition had not deceived me. I distrust intuition very often. Intuition may land you in quite as big a mess as reason itself will sometimes do; but, for once, I trusted it and I knew—*knew*, mind you—that the man who killed Lord Brooke's child had killed Lord Brooke! The man who could do one was easily capable of doing the other. I came here on the off chance that my intuition might prove correct, and you convinced me of it. But to know and to prove are very different things. Certain spade work had to be done. It

is practically finished since my visit to Florence. I find that Lord Brooke could have killed his brother, and I am now positive that he did do so."

"But, my dear Mr. Ringrose, consider the facts. I only offer two. Poor Brooke's dead horse was blinded by the scarf that his lordship carried. That we know."

"True; but do you know that Lord Brooke tied the scarf over his horse's eyes, doctor? You do not."

"Leave that, then. The other fact is that his brother, Burgoyne, was in Venice on the day that Lord Brooke died."

"And how do you know that?"

"He told me so himself. He only left there on the morning that we discovered the body, and our telegram to the Villa Pia reached Florence before he did."

"He would have done wiselier to be home before it came," answered John. "But what really happened, my friend, was this. Your Lord Brooke, two days before his death, travelled down to Bologna to meet his brother."

"I know that. He told me, when he came back, that Burgoyne Bewes was in the worst mess of his life and had the brokers in, or something."

"And you understood that Bewes had gone on to Venice for a while before returning home?"

"Exactly."

"But no, Considine."

"How can you possibly tell that?"

"Very simple indeed, because he was not at the trouble to cover his tracks. Of course he did not see the least necessity to do so. The exact details



are hidden with him; but since you are so sure of your own facts, doctor, I will give you another to add to them. At the Hotel Cavour, Bologna, Burgoyne Bewes only stayed one night after seeing his brother. He received two letters there, forwarded by Rockley from Florence; and when he departed, anticipating the arrival of other letters, he left his future direction at the Hotel Cavour."

"In Venice?"

"No, doctor—at Lugano. They consulted their books at the Hotel Cavour, found the entry, as I was able to furnish the exact date, and perceived that before Harold Stebbings, Esquire, went on his way, he left a direction to which any further letters should be sent. It was 'Care of Post Office, Lugano.' Let us see what follows."

"Good God! I know."

"Do you? I wish I did. But I think I know. We will now venture to assume, doctor, that the present Lord Brooke murdered his brother. My throat is dry. You pick up the threads. Let us see it from your point of view now."

"We'll go ashore," answered Considine. "This has knocked the stuffing out of me, Mr. Ringrose. I feel as if I was fighting a nightmare."

"I expect you do. I'm forgetting that this is nearly all news to you. We'll get back and have a drink. Then we can go on—unless you'd like to sleep on it."

"Sleep! I don't feel as if I should ever sleep again. And Mildred in the hands of that devil!"

"Fear nothing. He's genuinely fond of Mildred, and she of him."

For answer the doctor cranked up his engine and

they were soon ashore. The recital had taken two hours and the brink of Como was silent and deserted. A dark shadow slipped past their stern and a customs launch, like a black snake, chugged over the moonlit waters and cast its glaring electric eye on every side for smugglers.

Considine's motor-boat was hailed and ordered to heave to; but his voice and name sent the larger vessel on its way with a friendly good-night.

After a whisky and soda Ringrose perceived that his companion was in no case to listen any longer that night. He had overwhelmed Considine with the past; and since what must follow was calculated to put a still greater strain on his credulity, John spared him until the morrow. He had cleared the air and given a lucid and exhaustive view of the existing situation, as he saw it. He undertook to proceed on the following evening and formulate his own demands at a further interview.

They parted, therefore, until day returned; and when it did, Considine, in a dream, proceeded about his business; while the detective considered what yet he had to say and how most effectively to say it.

They dined together, and since the night was wet, proceeded afterward to the doctor's villa.

"One question," began Ringrose as they settled on easy-chairs, while warm rain whispered at the open window. "Do you now agree with me that we may assume Lord Brooke was responsible for his brother's death? I've proved to you that he killed the boy, suborning a scoundrel as big as himself to do so; and, incidentally, I've shown you that he came between you and your betrothed. But are you of my

opinion that he murdered his elder brother? Be frank."

"I've been thinking of it. If I didn't know the man, I should say you must be right; but, as a student of character, I find it awfully hard to believe. You see I'm fair—morbidly fair, perhaps. I'll leave my own grievance out of the calculation, as on a lesser plane of wickedness than murder. But when you tell me that the boy was done to death, and prove it as you have, then I must agree with you about the possibility of the other thing. It utterly belies his character, however, which was that of an irresponsible but kindly and genial man."

"As to character," answered the other, "both you and I ought to be more or less expert, since your business, as well as mine, largely turns on it often enough. Character in this case is everything; but character defies human knowledge, doctor, and many a man only uses some attributes of his endowment to mask others. You may be sympathetic and yet cruel. Your genius may embrace not only the power to penetrate the secrets of human hearts, but also the will to break those hearts after you have done so. Such are the mysteries of character and the subliminal. A man may weep to hear of sorrow to-day, and himself, with absolute indifference, inflict untold sorrow to-morrow. Lord Brooke appears to you, in one aspect, as full of gentle concern for his orphan nephew and niece. He may have actually felt that. The crocodile's tears can be perfectly genuine while he sheds them. Your dead friend, no doubt, saw in Burgoyne a reckless, extravagant spirit, with a good heart and no real vices. The insensate love of his ivories was

ridiculous and made him a nuisance; but his brother regarded him as a lovable nuisance and always forgave him and came to his rescue. He never guessed that, in Burgoyne Bewes, he was dealing with a man who lacked any moral sense whatever—a man absolutely indifferent to every human and divine obligation—a man with the genius of the devil and as willing to sacrifice his own family, when the time came, as anybody else.

“One thing stood between Burgoyne Bewes and his dream, and that was the need for unlimited cash. To secure unlimited cash, then, became his object. He cares not a straw for anything but the ivories, and the easiest way in which to reach the liberty that wealth would give him was to take his brother’s rank and title and secure his revenues. These are common-places in the light of subsequent events; but now I’ve got to dip a great deal deeper into his character than that; because upon his character my success, or failure, depends.”

“There’s always a weak spot somewhere, I suppose?”

“Not always. Many supreme scoundrels have a logical and intellectual machine that works perfectly. They are still free now, walking the earth unsuspected. It may be so with Lord Brooke. He may have no weak spot in his make-up. Time will show that. If he’s flawless, then I lose. If there’s a weak spot, I shall probably get him. It’s rather a fascinating and unusual case from my point of view. As a rule one has to find out the doer of a deed; this time we know that much, and the challenge is to prove it.”

“Impossible, surely. Granted that you trace him



from Bologna to Lugano at the critical date, how can you go farther and definitely associate him with his brother's death? Even physically the idea of such a murder seems absurd. The late Lord Brooke was a big and unusually powerful man; the present lord is below normal size—plump, soft, a physical weakling. You'll say he might have shot his brother and thrown him over; but I can swear no such thing happened. I examined the dead man with care, and the physician of the police—a very capable Italian—did the same. No bullet touched him. Broken though the body was, I could swear to that."

John Ringrose nodded.

"An interesting detail," he said, "and indirectly useful to me, as you will find in a minute. Your question, as to what more I can possibly do, brings us to the next point. In chess you sometimes have to force moves on your opponent, and that's where I am now. And that's where we shall learn more about character. I've begun to force moves for that matter. He can refuse to be forced and take the offensive himself; and that's what I hope and pray he will do. I had it all my own way at Florence. Old William Rockley, seeing only a friend of the late Arthur Bitton, suspected nothing; but I wasn't there only to glean, doctor; I went to sow if possible; and it proved possible, and I have sown. Next week Lord Brooke arrives at his villa and he will be sure to chat with Rockley about many things. He will mention the death of his valet to Rockley; and he will then find that the old man knows all about it, and how he knows all about it. Lord Brooke will hear that a certain 'Alec West' has been in Florence, and the name will be quite

familiar to him in connection with the inquest on Bitton. He will then, I think, cross-examine William pretty closely; and he will probably learn that old William has seen a good deal of Alec West and given him varied information on the subject of the Bewes family. Now what is Lord Brooke going to think then?"

"Why should he think anything? Why shouldn't he take the story at its face value?"

"Synthesis, my dear doctor—synthesis! You're forgetting all Lord Brooke knows. I don't mean the subjective knowledge that he's an unspeakable scoundrel. That won't complicate the situation, in the sense that it awakens remorse, or fear, but the other, objective knowledge, that a certain 'Norman Fordyce' was extraordinarily interested in that ivory of the two devils. I regretted his discovery of the fact at the time; but I am glad of it now. The recollection will return to him with considerable significance after he talks to Rockley. Suspicion will awake—sharp and vivid. He'll be exceedingly puzzled, as I believe, and possibly a little worried. An element of profound mystery must also attach to the situation, for the reason that he will not suppose himself to have an enemy in the world. He didn't cut anybody out of the title, except the holder and his heir—both dead. But the dead have no friends. Lord Brooke stands in nobody's light, for the present heir to the title is still a minor, of a cadet branch of the family."

"Then you are deliberately trying to make him suspicious and cautious?"

"Exactly; and why? Because there is no other way by which I can advance a step against him now; and this is the unique and interesting thing about

the case. This is where character becomes all important. I want to frighten him—if possible. I want him to realise that somebody unknown is tracking his past. I want him to understand that ‘Alec West’ and ‘Norman Fordyce’ are one and the same man; a man who is profoundly interested in him and taking an infinite deal of trouble about him. So this is where you come in, doctor.”

Ernest Considine both felt and looked more and more bewildered.

“You beat me, Ringrose. I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re getting at.”

“I’m getting at Lord Brooke. Have you ever heard of a double cross?”

The other nodded doubtfully.

“It’s a criminal dodge, to make a man think you’re going straight and win his trust, and then score off him—a sort of confidence trick, isn’t it?”

“Just so. Well, I’m not satisfied that I’ve put the wind up that rascal yet; but you’ve got to help me do so. You’ve got to double cross Lord Brooke, my friend. If criminals can do the trick, what’s to prevent honest men from using the same means; We can’t fight this infernal scamp in kid gloves. You have no sentiment about it, I imagine?”

“None—God knows! I believe you. I believe now that he’s all you say; and if I can help to prove it I shall be heartily glad. More, it’s my duty to the dead.”

“Good for you, doctor. Then you must warn Lord Brooke that I’m after him. You must make it clear that he has a busy, inquiring chap digging into his family history—one mightily interested in

everything to do with his recent past. I'll dictate the letter, if you please. It's very important to choose the right words, because your letter will be aimed at the weak spot, if there is one. On his reaction to that letter everything may depend."

"To warn him against you? Suppose he bolted?"

"That's the last thing he'll do. I'll explain. The situation is this. Without the help of Lord Brooke himself I can't get on. If he helps me, then I may bring him to book; if he declines to do so, I am just where I was when I first heard the story from old Mrs. Bellairs, last winter. So this is where the fun begins."

"Fun!"

"From my point of view. My business has always been the most amusing thing to me in my life—as well as the most distressing. That's the criterion that your existence is worth while: that it brings you pain as well as joy. What I want to make Lord Brooke realise is that I have discovered him to be a murderer. I then wish him to push the war into the unknown enemy's country. I need him to take the offensive and attack me. I need him to try to treat me exactly as he treated his unfortunate brother. There is absolutely no other way of bringing this home. The difference, of course, would lie in the fact that the late Lord Brooke went to his doom like a sheep to the slaughter; while I go to it firmly determined to escape the unknown stroke. But I must come so near to death myself that I am actually able to determine what the stroke was. I give myself into the villain's hands; but my weather eye is lifting. I'm looking out for squalls, and when the squall breaks, I am ready or it, though he must not guess that I am."



"The awful danger to you, Ringrose!"

"Danger, doctor? I hope so. I'd be glad to think this idea would mature so completely as to land me within an inch of my life. But we've got a long way to go first. My wish, of course, is that seeing he was so brilliantly successful last time, he'll try the same game again. But that's where his character is the doubtful factor. I can lead him to the precipice, but I can't make him put me over. It's a matter of psychology, as I see it, and everything depends on whether he'll take the wrong turn for him and the right turn for me."

Considine wiped the perspiration off his face, rose and took a few strides up and down the room.

"I'm beginning to see; I'm beginning to see. But surely there's another way?"

"If there is, tell me."

"You say it all depends on whether he'll take the right turn for himself, or for you. What's the right turn for himself?"

"If the devil doesn't desert him, he'll ignore me altogether. That's the right turn for himself. If he takes no notice of me and what I'm doing, then my game's up and he's as safe as a church. I can prove nothing beyond the fact that he went to Lugano. At Lugano I can, no doubt, find where he stopped and how long he stopped. That's routine work and doesn't really help. We may take it that he killed his brother single-handed—how, we have yet to find out. But it is absolutely impossible to find out unless he helps our discovery."

"Don't you chaps do what is called 'reconstruct the crime'?"

"Certainly. I've done that. Roughly speaking, it is not difficult. The brothers part at Bologna and the living Lord Brooke goes home to Menaggio. Two days later he hears from Burgoyne Bewes again—a letter from Lugano. What he says in it we cannot tell; but no doubt he spins a yarn and begs his brother to meet him privately, at some place known to both. He would have sent very serious news. Perhaps he told Lord Brooke that he had heard something disgraceful about you, doctor, and felt that the father of Miss Mildred ought to know it! Trust him to pitch a yarn to deceive his brother, anyway. That's easy. So Lord Brooke rides off to The Eagle's Larder, and to his death. Then Burgoyne Bewes blinds the horse and sends it after his master. In one stroke he creates the illusion of suicide that you fell for. There are a great many other little details of that meeting on The Eagle's Larder which mean a lot to me, but with which I needn't bother you. And when the deed is done, Bewes—still 'Mr. Stebbings,' probably—goes back to Lugano, spends another day there, possibly hears the body is found, and then goes home.

"One more point. Is there telephonic communication with the villa here, that used to belong to Lord Brooke?"

"Yes, there's a telephone to Como and so, of course, on to Milan and everywhere."

"Then a problem is solved. For Burgoyne Bewes to have met his brother by written appointment meant a letter, and that letter, unless he took extraordinary pains to prevent it, might have turned up afterward, as letters will, at an awkward moment.

He might, of course, have impressed upon his victim the importance of destroying the letter; or he might have included something in the letter which made it imperative for his lordship to take the letter with him to the tryst. He'd have seen to that detail had it been imperative; but, since there was a telephone, and Bewes could ring his brother up from Lugano, we may take it that's what he did. And now for your letter to Lord Brooke, doctor."

But Considine hesitated.

"I hate this business," he said. "Not for my sake, but yours, Ringrose."

"Better call me 'Fordyce' for the present."

"'Fordyce,' then. Don't you see this man may kill you? You are absolutely inviting him to do so."

John patted the other's arm.

"It's extraordinary how different life looks from different angles," he answered. "We've never got any imagination when we're dealing with another business than our own. If you were going to attend a family that had the plague, and I warned you that you might catch it, what would you say? If I met a soldier on his way to the front and advised him to stop at home, for fear of getting hurt, what would he answer?"

Doctor Considine laughed somewhat grimly and went to his desk.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE LETTER AND THE ANSWER

JOHN RINGROSE smoked for five minutes without speaking, while Ernest Considine sat with his pen in his hand. Then the detective asked a question.

"This letter has to bear the very stamp and seal of good faith," he said. "You've got to lie, I'm afraid; but you've got to lie like truth. First, then, how do you stand to Lord Brooke? Have you seen him, or communicated with him, since he came here to tell you his niece couldn't marry you?"

"Never seen him or written to him since."

"And didn't blame him? There was no scene? You parted friends?"

"Absolutely. He appeared to be as sorry as I was. I could not doubt him. It all looked natural enough."

"He knew his man, of course, and felt you'd accept the situation. Then you'll write in a friendly spirit actuated only by a wish for his welfare. This letter, by the way, must be timed. It will be directed to Brooke-Norton and arrive there after he has left. It must follow him and reach him a day or two after he gets to Florence. Then it will, or should, complete the good work which old Rockley has begun. Of course, if he leaves his niece behind—— However, we can leave that to its proper time."



"In any case I must see Mildred. I'll write no more letters to be stolen—and no more shall she, if I can help it."

"Quite sound. Now go ahead, doctor."

Ringrose flung the stump of his cigar out of the window into the night. The rain had stopped and the stars shone. There was a drip of water from the branches of the trees. John spoke, slowly giving the other time to record his words:

"DEAR LORD BROOKE: A rather curious thing has happened at Menaggio, and since you seem to be involved, I feel it my duty to report the incident. It may be more explicable to you than myself, and probably there is nothing whatever in it; but certain features of the occurrence incline me to write this letter. Don't bother to answer if the matter is of no consequence."

The detective broke off.

"You've probably written other letters to this chap in the past," he said, "so, if I use any phrase or form of words which you would not, put it your own way."

"All right so far," answered the other, and John proceeded:

"There has come a man to Hotel Lario—a commonplace tourist called Norman Fordyce. He sent for me the day after he arrived and thought, or said he thought, he had a chill. There was, however, nothing the matter with him. He is a dark, clean-shaven, cheerful sort of man with friendly manners—rather under middle height, about fifty-five, perhaps, and

going grey, but strong and energetic. A lower middle-class person, but quite decent and well-mannered and rather amusing."

Considine could not forbear to chuckle.

"That's about right—eh, doctor? That's what is called seeing yourself as others see you—eh?"

John continued to dictate:

"From the first this man haunted me and displayed an extraordinary interest in your family. He knew certain things; but he wanted to know everything. I did not gratify his curiosity at first, until he told me he had visited you at Brooke-Norton and you had entertained him and been very sporting to him. It was, he said, about an ivory that he had to sell, which you bought.

"He was especially eager concerning the fate of my late dear friend, you brother; and I found, on considering our conversation one night after he had left me, that apparently his only real interest at Menaggio centred in everything that he could glean from me about the past life of the late Lord Brooke, his death and the death of his son, poor little Ludovic. Of course, concerning your brother, I merely said that he had met with a fatal accident on the mountains. But now I began to wonder what it was all about, and if you really knew Mr. Fordyce as well as he asserted. I became more reticent. I was interested in my turn and tried to draw Mr. Fordyce out. I failed. He had nothing to tell, save that he was a commercial traveller retired from business."

Considine stopped and asked a question.

"One moment. How would it be if I said that you spent a long day at The Eagle's Larder?"

"On no account, my dear fellow. The Eagle's Larder is my sheet anchor. You'll hear a good deal more about that in a week or two, if I have any luck. No—leave details for the minute. The letter is long enough. I only want to add two more points to bring him to the scratch if possible."

"Go ahead then."

John proceeded:

"A few days ago Fordyce, who evidently knew you had a villa at Florence, left here, saying that he meant to go there. He was away three days, and when he came back, he seemed to have lost interest in you and your family. To-day he has gone, to stop for some time at Lugano—or so he says. Whether I shall see him again or no I cannot tell.

"This may seem an absurd letter to write to you, and if so, do not bother to acknowledge it; but somehow I feel driven to send it."

After a pause John directed the other to sign as he was accustomed to do—

"Yours sincerely,

"ERNEST CONSIDINE."

The doctor repeated his words aloud.

"Now a postscript," added John:

"P.S.—Mr. Fordyce says he thinks that Mildred is betrothed to a Cornishman. If this is true, please give her my heartfelt congratulations."

But the lover resented this.

"Why the devil should I say that?"

"It's dead right and natural. Lord Brooke will know that I shall probably mention the girl; and if you don't, he'll think at once that I may have told you about the jilting, doctor, and heard the truth. By sending the postscript you show him that the facts of your separation from Mildred have not come to your ears. Otherwise he would suspect. And, of course, he'd suspect the whole letter if he thought, for a moment, that you knew he had choked you off his niece. As to the point of my going to Florence, that is to make him grasp, once for all, that 'Alec West' and 'Norman Fordyce' are two false names for the same unknown person. And if that doesn't fire him to find out who the unknown person is, nothing will."

"Yes, I see that."

"Think it ought to fetch him?"

"If anything could."

"Yet he's safe for evermore if he ignores that letter."

"But he can't be sure he's safe."

"He can if he reflects. We must hope he's a fighter and isn't going to take this in the only safe way possible: and that's lying down."

"No man would be content to feel an unknown fellow man was probing and ferreting into the most dangerous and secret passages of his life, without putting up a fight."

"Only a stupendously clever man, who grasps the fact that he's safe so long as he does nothing. But he'll find it, I hope, beyond his character to do nothing. When he gets your letter, he'll know that I'm at Lugano. And now I want you to consider for a moment exactly what the situation is from his point



of view when he does get this letter. Exactly how is this double cross of ours going to affect Lord Brooke? The temptation to sit tight will be very great; but such a situation must run him into other temptations, which may be greater.

"He receives your letter, and he immediately pictures me at Lugano trying to prove that he was there on the critical date of his brother's death. He may know that I can prove he was there, even if I cannot prove where he stopped; but if he stopped there in the same name that he stopped at Bologna, that of 'Harold Stebbings,' then to find where he stopped is only a question of hunting long enough. He may have assumed another name there—in which case I shall take longer about that detail; we know at any rate he was there, because letters were redirected there from Bologna. That's all that matters.

"Lord Brooke, then, knows I am at Lugano. I, however, know nothing about your letter to him, or that he has been warned of my activities at Menaggio. I do not imagine that Lord Brooke knows I am one and the same with Alec West. The arrival of Alec West at Florence I may guess he has discovered; but I—Norman Fordyce—cannot have any sure knowledge that Lord Brooke has identified me with the probable destroyer of Arthur Bitton. He comes to Lugano, therefore—at least we'll hope so—to find, if possible, a man who is deeply concerned with him, *but a man who does not guess that he knows it.* He meets me at Lugano with this immense advantage over me—that, while he knows I am a secret enemy, he can deceive me into thinking he does not know it and is still my friend. Such a situation, if it were real,

would enormously increase his power of dealing with me as he would wish; and I should, of course, play into his hands up to the last moment."

"You may go too far."

"That's up to me, doctor. If I do, then it will be up to you. The remaining point is what date to put upon your letter to him; and that you cannot tell until we know he's left Brooke-Norton."

"That will probably be in *The Times*, under 'Court Circular.' He wouldn't bother to send it, but the butler does, I expect. They always do."

"Good! Yes, he has just the butler to look after a detail like that. *The Times* gets here the day after publication, so that will just be right."

They parted, and three days later the expected announcement appeared: Lord Brooke had left England for Italy. Whereupon Considine dispatched his letter to Brooke-Norton and Ringrose prepared to go to Lugano. Before this event, however, he devoted two days to The Eagle's Larder and studied every detail of that lonely upland meadow perched on its shelf of precipices. He went alone, upon a mule that could be trusted to behave with good manners; and none but the doctor knew that he had gone there.

"It may be wasted time," said John. "On the other hand, it may make all the difference. Intuition again, doctor. I've got a 'hunch', as the Americans so expressively say."

"You think he'll take the field against you?"

"The more I think, the more I hope and believe he will. He'll know now that he has interested a rather wily stranger; and, as he's never yet met a man half so wily as himself, he may feel his self-

respect involved by such a challenge. He may be the fighting sort under his skin. He may even share my enthusiasm for a battle with somebody his own size. And on the other hand, he may reckon that I'm several sizes smaller than he is; and he may be right. I much hope he'll take that view anyway."

"If he fights, he'll be far too astute to underrate you," said Considine.

"At first; but my object will be to create in him a mistaken impression of my intelligence. It is very easy indeed to make people think you're not so clever as they are."

"There's only one fatal thing. He'll want to know what the devil you're after, and if he asks you straight out, what on earth are you going to say?"

John laughed.

"I don't think the duel will be fought on those lines, my friend. But there's another question and we must leave nothing to chance. He may answer your letter, or he may come to see you for more information. If he does the latter, you're in for the cross-examination of your life. It's quite possible he'll take you on the way to Lugano—if he decides to fight—and there are certain things about which you must lie like a trooper. Sorry, but you'll have to. Liars must often be fought with lies. You will have to make it clear that I never associated you with the medical man who jilted Mildred Bewes. My tact, you see, would have avoided that subject, and so you have no light on that little matter. You must also assure him that I am entirely ignorant of the actual scene of his brother's death and never manifested any curiosity on that subject. Insist,

however, upon my great interest in the boy, Ludovic. That's what I most want him to think about for the moment."

"He may not come."

"Very possibly not. He's more likely to go straight to Lugano, if he goes anywhere. Should he write, send me the letter instantly.

"I'll bring it myself."

"On no account—whatever it is. He may have one answer for you and quite another for me. If by chance he met you at Lugano, the whole show is given away."

Ringrose impressed other considerations upon his confederate. Then, when Lord Brooke's departure was chronicled from England, the letter went to Brooke-Norton, and two days later, John took leave of the doctor and disappeared. In twenty-four hours he had sent the direction of the Victoria Hotel, Lugano.

But once beyond the exciting aura of the detective's presence, Considine had leisure for prodigious new hopes awakened by recent events in his own existence. For him the world was changed, and a future, lonely and colourless, now promised to quicken, bud and bloom. His impatience and excitement were increased by the knowledge, duly recorded in *The Times*, that the Honourable Mildred Bewes accompanied her uncle to Florence.

Punctually to the day that he expected it, there came his lordship's reply. Indeed, it arrived sooner than Considine supposed that it would, for he was familiar with Lord Brooke's Oriental contempt of time.



And when the reply reached him, he lamented very heartily for John Ringrose, though he rejoiced for himself. Because the rumoured engagement of the girl had wakened his very real uneasiness. It seemed a reasonable thing to happen, and he could not hide from himself that after the passage of years, Mildred, believing him false, had found herself presently able to love another man. Moreover, her uncle's influence must be powerful. The danger threatened, but was not acute.

Thus wrote Lord Brooke:

"VILLA PIA, FIRENZE.

"DEAR CONSIDINE :

"Your letter reaches me and, seeing its nature, I hasten to reply and thank you for your solicitude on my behalf. It has always been a very genuine regret to me that the family tie I had hoped and expected to arise between us failed to be created. But the feminine mind ever remains incomprehensible. Mildred is being courted by an excellent fellow; though as yet I have not heard her views. He is Nicholas Tremayne, of Polbarth in Cornwall, and springs from a notable family, though not destined to set the Thames on fire himself. He has devotion and plenty of money, so I hope she may presently make him happy.

"As to your letter, I recollect the name and some such person as you describe. Also a very fine ivory, a good deal more interesting than himself, which I purchased from him. Why the aforesaid individual should be interested in our family I cannot guess. Perhaps I shall hear from him again. He may be one of those curious people

who write subscription books about the 'Upper Ten' and the landed gentry, or something of that sort. If so, no doubt I shall be informed of his achievements, or receive a circular.

"We are in the dear old city for a month—possibly longer. When my niece is wedded I hope to see the Lakes again and renew your acquaintance; but I hesitate to ask Mildred to revisit scenes that must for ever be associated in her mind with sorrow. A man of your susceptibilities will be quick to appreciate the position.

"I am, my dear Considine,

"Sincerely yours,

"BROOKE."

In ten minutes the letter was dispatched to Lugano, and on the morrow, John Ringrose got it. He read it, then put the letter in his pocket and strolled down to the brink of the lake. There he sat and once more studied the communication. Disappointment struggled with admiration, and behind the mingled emotions aroused in him, still persisted a subconscious conviction, that even in face of this contemptuous note, the end was not yet. But for the moment there remained nothing for him to do. Once more it seemed that the ground had been cut away from beneath his feet and he stood no nearer the object of his pilgrimage than when he started upon it. Yet he felt this to be a pessimistic attitude unjustified by facts. He considered, not for the first time, Lord Brooke's mental activities on receipt of Considine's letter, and he reminded himself of an idea put into words when last

with the doctor. Hope revived. Brooke's letter had been written to Considine—for that young man's consumption only. When writing it, the author was of set purpose unconcerned with Norman Fordyce, or the unknown individual masquerading under that name. Considine had written to Lord Brooke about peculiar incidents, but he had not, of course, attached the least sinister meaning to them; and it was natural that the other should reply in the same vein. Lord Brooke would not feel any desire to reveal to Considine, or another, the personal significance of his information, or the steps he might see fit to take upon hearing it. He was in the highest degree likely to ignore the importance of such an incident—to Considine. But that fact by no means proved he would really do nothing. Whether his genius would actually rise to adopting the indifferent attitude that he assumed, remained to be seen; but Ringrose, by an exercise of pure reason, reminded himself that the letter from Florence betrayed nothing of the truth. Doctor Considine's communication, coupled with the gossip of William Rockley, remained, and Lord Brooke's reply to the doctor gave no sign of their actual effect on him, or his own real purpose concerning them.

He considered for an hour, then took a steamer and spent another hour upon the lake, entering the little ports about its margins. He had abstained from any inquiries at Lugano, since the necessity to do so did not really exist. Proof that letters had been forwarded to Lord Brooke from Bologna under his *nom de guerre* at the critical date, he possessed.

He came back to the Hotel Victoria for lunch and proceeding down the main street of the town, suddenly

encountered Lord Brooke gazing into the window of a curiosity shop. The challenge was answered! John Ringrose, knowing himself sought, went on his way, but pretended not to see the other as he passed him. Next he heard a sudden expression of pleasure and a warm greeting.

"By Jove! It's Mr. Fordyce!"

He turned round, started and showed surprise, mingled with the faintest shadow of consternation. Then he took off his hat and shook the extended hand heartily.

"How do you do, your lordship—proud to see you!" he said.

In a spirit of reverence combined with geniality on John's part, and a sort of good-natured pleasure revealed by Lord Brooke at so unexpected a meeting, the men played their parts. Each outvied the other in amiability and each listened with simulated interest to the other, knowing that the other lied.

The great comedy opened with mutual politeness and expressions of regard. Lord Brooke was pursuing his life's quest of old ivories; Mr. Fordyce had come abroad with a friend, once in the same line of business as himself, who was wont to travel for an English firm in Italy. This imaginary being had been called home by his wife's illness, and Norman Fordyce, feeling lonely, intended to return himself at the end of the week. No, he had not visited Rome or Florence. He thought Turin would interest him more. They chatted for ten minutes and Ringrose, prating of the merit of the Hotel Victoria, ventured to invite Lord Brooke to dine with him. He feared that he had no right to ask for such an honour, but declared



that it would be a great privilege to repay a little of the hospitality he had received at Brooke-Norton. He knew the invitation would be accepted, and it was. They parted, each with his own thoughts, each deeply concerned to guess at the other's, each occupied with the coming interchanges, each cherishing secret knowledge which his opponent did not possess. And certain it is that if either had known the full extent of his adversary's information, the battle now about to be joined between them must have furnished a different sequel.

Before he had gone ten yards Lord Brooke rejoined Ringrose for a moment.

"By the way," he said, "I forgot to tell you I'm here incognito. Italians make such an infernal fuss over a title that I always shirk it. I am just 'Mr. Bewes,' you understand."

"I'll be sure to remember, my lord," answered John.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE DINNER PARTY

THE detective welcomed the few hours that separated him from the coming entertainment. Plans had to be made and a course of action laid down; but in so far as action was concerned, he could do little more than leave Lord Brooke to take the initiative. What John Ringrose desired to happen might very easily be frustrated by the other, though since he suspected that he and his enemy would prove of one mind on the crucial point, he permitted himself to pursue its possibilities on the assumption that it would happen. He wrote and posted a brief letter to Ernest Considine, indicating that Lord Brooke was at Lugano.

In the domain of theory also John pursued his inquiries, for it was essential before they met that he should be approximately clear in his mind on two issues. He wanted to know what Lord Brooke was thinking and still more he wanted to know what Lord Brooke imagined he was thinking.

The extent of the other's personal mystifications occupied him first. Brooke now knew that, for the period of nearly nine months, an unknown man—obviously an inquiry agent, or professional detective—

had been busy about his affairs. This man understood the past relationship of Arthur Bitton and himself, and he had in some way, impossible to discover, apparently hounded Bitton into his grave. He had then appeared at Brooke-Norton and, under pretence of selling an ivory, improved his knowledge of Bitton's master. The accident of the Barthel carving must, in the light of subsequent events, have assumed enormous importance to Lord Brooke. It linked the unknown visitor with Bitton's vanished friend, and it showed an astounding knowledge of past incidents in connection with Bitton and the dead child. That 'Alec West' and 'Norman Fordyce' were one, Lord Brooke now knew, and that the man who posed, first in the former name and secondly in the latter, had learned certain very important facts from William Rockley he probably also knew. But, however much or little he had gleaned from Rockley, it was certain that Considine's letter completed the evidence against the stranger.

In reply to that letter Lord Brooke had impressed Considine with the fact that he was going to do nothing and attached no importance to the incident; but in reality he had come instantly to Lugano, that he might meet the inquisitive unknown face to face and arrive at some understanding, or take steps to cut short his activities.

Lord Brooke must be both alarmed and intensely curious. The unknown was "getting hot." He certainly knew a great deal about the death of Ludovic Bewes, though it appeared equally clear that, unless possessed of information hidden from all living men but Lord Brooke himself, he could know

nothing concerning the death of the child's father. Doctor Considine, in writing to Lord Brooke, had made it clear that he had told Fordyce no more than what was publicly announced concerning that death. Therefore, the unknown could only imagine that the late Lord Brooke had met with a fatal accident. Against this supposition, however, the enemy would remember that his opponent, being familiar with particulars concerning the boy's end, and evidently associating them with Lord Brooke, might argue that the man who caused Ludovic to be destroyed would not have hesitated to treat his own brother in the same way. To inquire into this matter, therefore, the unknown had probably come to Italy.

The minor problem, as to why this stranger was pursuing an inquiry so arduous, would also greatly puzzle Lord Brooke; and Ringrose suspected that he might first seek light upon it; for John's connections in the outer world and the extent of his touch with them would certainly be a consideration. Lord Brooke would want to know, not only who he was, but for whom he was operating. That he was working single-handed and entirely on his own account would not occur to his lordship. This view: that the real opponent lay behind Ringrose, might breed caution in Lord Brooke which was the last thing that the detective desired to provoke. Yet it was impossible for himself to proclaim the true facts. He could only manœuvre in such a way as to tempt the other to strike: he could not make him strike.

Then followed the second issue. Brooke would be deeply anxious to know exactly what the unknown was thinking. His opponent still posed as "Norman



Fordyce " and evidently meant to continue doing so. "Fordyce" was apparently powerless, but he might have sources of information concealed from Lord Brooke. He had evidently, by way of Bologna, traced him to Lugano at the critical date, for Lord Brooke would recollect the letters forwarded to him there. Yet what more could the enemy possibly know? To learn what more would surely be Lord Brooke's object at their approaching dinner. But how to gratify that curiosity, while himself playing the part of an innocent man, John Ringrose did not as yet see. It depended entirely upon the line of attack, and concerning that he remained in ignorance, for Brooke's mentality was still uncalculable. The detective could only hope that a simple ruse, which he had designed for their meeting, would fulfil its object, and add to Lord Brooke's information; though, with such a man as his opponent, the snare might be spread in vain.

He had engaged a private sitting-room at the Hotel Victoria, and designed that in this apartment the dinner should be served.

He was seated at a writing-desk in the window, engaged upon a letter, when the hour for the meal arrived. He had written one page of his communication, on hotel note-paper, and was halfway down the next when his guest was announced. He thereupon started up with some slight show of surprise, and ostentatiously dropped a piece of blotting-paper over the unfinished note.

"Welcome, Mr. Bewes, welcome!" he said, shaking the extended hand; then he turned to the waiter.

"An *apéritif* for Mr. Bewes, my lad, and dinner in five minutes."

Then he chatted with the visitor until two cocktails had been brought, drank one, and begged the guest to excuse him.

"I didn't know the time," he said. "Just a wash and brush up. You'll pardon lack of war-paint, Mr. Bewes. I'm travelling light."

He left the room, after the waiter had done so, went to his bedchamber, put on a black coat and black tie and brushed his hair. In seven minutes he returned and went to the writing-desk. Meanwhile his guest had perceived the little indications that John was disconcerted at his sudden entrance, and had noticed the action with the blotting-paper. Subsequent conversation before he left the room may or may not have led Lord Brooke to judge that his unfinished letter had escaped John's mind. At any rate, that was the idea Mr. Ringrose had desired to convey. Alone in the room, Lord Brooke had lifted the blotting-paper carefully and read the unfinished communication. Thus it ran:

"HOTEL VICTORIA,

"LUGANO.

"MY DEAR WIFE,

"The astounding discovery begun with Arthur Bitton at Bridport is now on the way to its end. I have little doubt that Lord Brooke murdered his brother, and the details will yield to my methods. He is alarmed and he is here. We have met and he dines with me to-night. He is an amazingly clever devil and I shall need to handle him in my best manner. The beauty of it is that nobody on earth knows that he's the biggest blackguard

unchanged, or that I'm after him! The Yard will wonder! I go to-morrow to The Eagle's Larder—a spot in the mountains where the crime——”

Lord Brooke replaced the letter carefully and restored the blotting paper with scrupulous exactness. Its contents had in no way astonished him and he felt no doubt whatever that it had been intended he should read it, because it contained an essential item which he knew to be false. He laughed silently, walked out on to the balcony of the apartment and was gazing over Lugano when his host returned, hastened to the desk and, putting his papers in a drawer, locked it. John then rang the bell for dinner and joined his guest. He revealed just that slight flutter of perturbation proper to one who has committed an act of extraordinary stupidity. But would not the other read through it? Was it not too transparent? Had Brooke even troubled to look at the letter? John's only hope was that the other would under-rate his ability and believe the letter. At any rate, whether he believed it or no, the detective judged that its contents must have startled him. Nothing in Lord Brooke's manner, however, indicated that he had been perturbed and it remained for John to learn, through subsequent conversation, that he had indeed read the letter.

“How heavenly Lugano is from here,” said the visitor. “The dusk and the vast purple shadows, after the sun has set, make it infinitely beautiful.”

“I suppose they do. I'm a bit fed up myself. I'm for home in a day or two. Come and eat, my lord—Mr. Bewes, I should say.”

A very perfect meal had been prepared and his lordship did justice to it; while John, playing a part which involved the most delicate shade of pretended distraction, drank pretty heartily, but declared Italian cooking was getting on his nerves. He had to act the retired commercial traveller before a man who knew perfectly well that he was acting; but he strove successfully to recreate the "Norman Fordyce" of Brooke-Norton.

They chatted on the subject of Lord Brooke's hobby, and he declared his visit to Lugano had not been in vain. Then his lordship inquired concerning Mr. Fordyce's travels, and John sketched an itinerary the other must know to be inaccurate. They told each other entertaining stories and played their parts with immense skill, each waiting for an opening.

Then Lord Brooke asked a question:

"When you were on Como, did you happen to meet a medical man, a doctor called Considine?"

"At Menaggio—yes. I did meet him, and I guessed he must have been the chap who turned down your niece. I thought I was sick there—a chill—and he looked over me and found I was all right. A decent sort of bird—so he seemed. Of course I didn't allude to Miss Bewes."

"Was he married?"

"Can't say. I only saw him once."

Lord Brooke nodded thoughtfully.

"A mystery that. I shall never understand it."

"I hope the young lady is going strong? She was a charming girl, if I may say so."

"She's all right—at Florence just now. If I can get a little bargain presently I shall return there in a



day or two. I have, however, a pilgrimage of sentiment to make before I go back."

John pricked his ears but showed no interest, and the other did not immediately pursue the subject. By gradual degrees, from a spirit of genial friendship, he became apparently more self-absorbed. There were pauses between the intervals of talk and Lord Brooke appeared to be communing with his own thoughts. From these reveries he would emerge, listen to his host, or himself make conversation, and then retreat, as it were, behind a cloud again.

Ringrose became curiously conscious that he himself was living over the past again. He remembered those periods of hesitation when Arthur Bitton, tempted and inspired by John's sentiments, trembled, not once but many times, on the brink of confidences, yet resisted making them. And now, though he could hardly trust his ears, it seemed as though the guest was also reviewing hideous events from the past and considering whether to enter upon those dark experiences hidden in his heart alone.

An impression so improbable kept Ringrose alert and incredulous. He waited to hear more before pretending to understand Lord Brooke's meaning. Indeed he made it clear, by his replies, that he failed either to appreciate or respond to any such drift in the other's mind. The idea that this man was obeying those psychological promptings that had moved Bitton, when his wickedness was impressed so dreadfully upon him; the notion that Lord Brooke, in the shadow of peril, would react to primitive human instinct and seek a confidant, was just possible, though improbable to a degree; but that he should indicate

cowardly desire for more friendly relations with a known enemy, the detective rejected as a development contrary to character and therefore false.

Yet Lord Brooke continued to harp on this string, with notes so clear that at last he left no doubt of the extraordinary impression he desired to convey. From a certain pensive attitude, combined with general reflections on the fallibility of human nature and the illusory hope of happiness, he became personal.

"You and the rest of the world, Mr. Fordyce, think I'm a jester," he said, "but few men have less to jest about than myself. Life has probed me pretty thoroughly, and none has more to lament and less to satisfy him when he looks backward. I am a curious being. A ruling passion, if nature has provided no counterweights or controls, is about the most terrible endowment; and I, who speak to you, have lived to experience in my own person the fearful consequences of being possessed and dominated by an idea."

John responded mechanically.

"It depends on the idea, my lord."

They were now alone, smoking their cigars and drinking coffee and liqueurs.

"A dominant idea, or ruling passion, as we call it," continued the elder, "may no doubt be a very noble inheritance, or endowment. Men of one idea go the farthest, and if that idea is on the line of progress and destined to advance the welfare of humanity, then such men become the salt of the earth."

Lord Brooke agreed.

"Very true indeed," he said. "But if, as in my case, the driving instinct, while not actually unsocial, is none the less useless; if it becomes the sole rule of

life; if it attains such infernal mastery that it distorts reason and duty and—and every rule of conduct——”

He broke off and sighed. He presented a man given to reflection—a being temperamentally different from himself, as Ringrose had known him up to the present.

“Then, of course, it may well become a curse and land the sufferer in grave difficulties of conscience,” admitted John.

More and more the unreality of this conversation impressed itself upon him; and yet, if his opponent were playing a part, he certainly performed to perfection.

Lord Brooke broke off now, made general remarks on character and confessed that he had never in his life contracted a close friendship.

“It is a fact,” he said, “that I have neither liked nor disliked my fellow creatures. Any reputation as I may have acquired as a good fellow is the result not of a warm heart, but a cold one. Thus such men as I am often get a measure of credit we don’t deserve. Men I regard merely as useful or useless, and as common sense reminds me that the useless of to-day may be the useful of to-morrow, I never quarrel with anybody. Women have not entered into my life, save on the rare occasions when they could be useful. With only one woman did I ever interfere from altruistic reasons—for her own sake, not my own. I may tell you that story if you care to learn it; but what for the moment I am coming to is this—that my indifference to mankind received a curious shock when I met you. Don’t laugh. I know it sounds absurd, but it is none the less a fact, that when you came to Brooke-Norton—a man not in my narrow and circumscribed sphere,

a man whose life and activities had doubtless led him to take a different and larger view of life than mine—a man, who, as it were, crossed my own path at right angles for the infinitely brief space of time represented by a few hours only—then something in you, or something in myself rather, responded to the clash, and I found in you a puzzling interest, and felt toward you a friendly sentiment which was absolutely outside any former experience.”

“You do me much honour,” said Ringrose, doubting if he waked or slept.

“Not in the least. It rather bored me, if anything, when I realized it. Who were you and what could you be to me? Frankly I was glad to see the last of you; and I doubted not that I should very quickly think the last of you when you had gone. But it was not so. I found you sticking in my mind, like a burr, and asked myself a hundred times and with gathering impatience what the deuce there was about you unlike other people, to create this extraordinary interest. You think I’m talking nonsense?”

“Indeed, no. Why should you say these remarkable things if you don’t mean them?”

“When you had gone, it is a fact that I wanted you back. Why, I could not conceive at the time. Perhaps I hardly know yet ; but I did, and when I saw you suddenly and unexpectedly this morning, beside me in the open street, an emotion of something very like delight overpowered me. I cannot conceal my feelings, as you will have discovered, and I did not attempt to do so. There is, however, a great deal more in this than meets the eye. I have thought much since we met a few hours ago. But I bore you?”



Ringrose considered before replying. It was now that he perceived a likeness in the speaker's attitude of mind to that he had awakened in Arthur Bitton; but while in the former case it had been genuine, here, seeing what Lord Brooke knew of John, it could not possibly be. The mind of the detective ran on to his companion's motives. He believed that he guessed them, and he essayed to make the way a little clearer for Lord Brooke by changing the subject. He indicated bewilderment on his face and a sense of embarrassment.

"I'm an everyday sort of man, your lordship, and, of course, anybody like you is out of my experience. I liked you naturally, for nobody—none of the big wigs, I mean—had treated me in such a friendly way as you. But, you see, our paths in life are widely separated. I shall be going home the day after to-morrow, I expect. And, if it were ever in my power to do you a service—though it sounds absurd that I could—gladly I would do so."

He stopped. The hollow absurdity of this talk made him impatient. What on earth was the use of going on pretending in his own case; while as for the other, any desire that he might have for closer relations could only be sinister. And surely he must know that Ringrose knew it?

He then gave Lord Brooke his opportunity.

"For my final trip," he said in the silence that followed his last remark, "for my last trip, I thought to take a steamer and go over to Santa Margharita to-morrow. They tell me there's a climbing railway there that will take me up to a place called the Belvedere di Larizo, where you get a wonderful view."

John looked straight into the other man's eyes as he spoke; but Lord Brooke betrayed nothing. He nodded and indicated that he regretted the change in their conversation.

"Yes—yes—a grand view. You can't do better, I dare say."

"I'll try it then," declared John and lit another cigar. For the next speech he waited with infinite interest.

"I'm going afield to-morrow, too," said Lord Brooke after a pause. "I intend to visit one of the most beautiful spots in this district—and one of the saddest on earth to me. Have you heard of La Sporta dell' Aquila, or The Eagle's Basket, or Larder, as we call it in English?"

"Never," said Ringrose, and his answer provoked not a flicker. Even now he could not be positive that Brooke had read his letter.

"It's a tongue of grounds under Monte Galbiga, some miles to the north of the little lake of Piano, which you pass in the train between Porlezza and Menaggio. From that place you can see both Como and Lugano, and enjoy a marvellous view to the north over Val Cavargna to the mountains, and to the South across the range that separates the lakes."

"It sounds all right."

"I spoke of a pilgrimage just now," continued the other. "At La Sporta dell' Aquila my brother lost his life, and something always draws me there. I have visited the place every year since his fatal accident. I should have been a better and cleaner man, Fordyce, if he had lived. His death in a sense ruined me."

Ringrose appreciated the terrific truth of these words, but pretended not to do so.

"An elder brother can be a good influence, no doubt, my lord, if he's the right sort."

Lord Brooke regarded Ringrose with a strange expression.

"Sometimes I wonder if you know more of me than you let appear in your answers," he said. "It's a curious sensation. Perhaps the wish is father to the thought. I want you to know more of me, and in a way it puzzles me that you do not; yet how can you?"

Again bewilderment covered the detective's features. He made as though to speak, but only stared.

Lord Brooke continued:

"There is a strange desire in my mind that you should know more of me. Strange, because I never felt such a desire before in the presence of any human creature—not even my own brother. Probably it's pure selfishness. Everything I do and think is selfish. But it exists. There has come over me a want—a need—a hunger to talk to you about things so unbelievable that I dare say you won't believe them. Yet they are true. Can you humour me in this matter and accept a confidence? A confidence is often an impertinence, and I shall understand if you desire no such thing and don't reciprocate my feeling. Indeed I see by your face you don't. Yet you are a man of tremendous human sympathies—I, that have none, can recognise them in another. Will you listen to me?"

"Why, of course, my lord, if you think I can help you."

"Do you *want* to help me?"

The point was made with such terrible intensity and earnestness that it seemed a hard question to answer with a lie. But John experienced no sense of hypnotism before this appeal. He clove to the reality underlying the pretence and believed that all must be a pretence. He knew what was coming.

"If it's in my power, I'll be proud to listen to you and help you, too," he answered.

"It may be in your power. At least it's in your power to join my little expedition to-morrow and come to Monte Galbiga. Then I could tell you what I feel so impelled to tell. It's a mystery, Fordyce; but, by God, it's a reality!"

"I'll come with pleasure, if you honestly wish it, my lord. I'm no great walker, though."

"You do not need to be. We take steamer to Porlezza—there's one at ten o'clock from here—and thence the climb—on an easy, hairpin road for the most part—is not much above five miles, I think."

"I'm good for that."

"It is unspeakably kind. I appreciate your concession far more than I can tell you."

"I'll look out for the ten o'clock boat, then."

Lord Brooke nodded and indicated a deep sense of the other's good will. For a moment he seemed too moved to speak. Then insensibly he returned to a more conventional frame of mind, dismissed his own preoccupations and spoke on indifferent subjects. But the newly developed friendship apparently permitted to him a certain warmth and absence of reserve already. With returning animation he showed an instinct to be confidential—an almost ingenuous pleasure at finding in John Ringrose one who had



opened portals in his heart that none, as yet, had ever even discovered.

The evening ended after eleven o'clock and the guest went his way, leaving a man who indeed much desired to be alone, to measure the significance of all that he had heard.

John never was a niggard of praise where he held that it had been earned, and he felt an immediate, professional instinct to commend his adversary's general opening of the attack. But it was necessary to reflect somewhat deeply before even praise might be accorded Lord Brooke's strategy. He could not yet feel sure that the other had been so very astute.

He examined the line taken. Lord Brooke had acted on a certain preconceived plan. He had pretended that he knew nothing of Ringrose's activities before Ringrose went to Brooke-Norton, and nothing of his researches after he left Brooke-Norton. He had proclaimed a strange sentiment of attraction to John, an inclination to trust him and even confide in him. He admitted that no such prompting had ever touched his heart before; and yet a stranger had awakened it. He had spoken as if, after John's departure, he had desired his return; and he had certainly shown great pleasure at meeting John in Lugano. He had also exhibited extreme surprise when they came together. Then, awakened by the meeting, Lord Brooke's emotion had quickened, until his tone was altered and he revealed an intense satisfaction at the other's presence—a satisfaction which puzzled Lord Brooke himself—but which none the less speedily developed into the desire for closer relations and confidence—confidence of deeply significant character.

But what was the truth? Lord Brooke's knowledge of John Ringrose and his activities must of necessity be far deeper than he pretended. It was impossible that he knew nothing more than he had asserted to Ringrose, and impossible that he could suppose Ringrose would believe him. What had brought him to Lugano at this moment? It was true Considine's letter had told him Ringrose was at Lugano; but it had told him much more than that, and William Rockley must have at the least made it clear that Fordyce and Alec West were one. Lord Brooke, then, certainly knew all about him. And thereupon John followed a very curious train of thought. Suppose that on the morrow, among the peaks and precipices, his opponent, instead of seeking to destroy him, were to confess his crime? Suppose that this man, faced with the fact that he was discovered, should make a clean breast of it? Was it to that his recent conversation paved the way? If so, where stood Ringrose?

"That would be devilish clever—up to a point," thought John. "But he can't regard himself as in such a tight place yet." The detective considered what would follow such a step. If the confession fell on his ear from a man wakened into terror and remorse by circumstance, what rôle must the confessor play afterward? To ask the question was to answer it. No pity for Lord Brooke stirred in the heart of Ringrose. Indeed, he delayed but a moment on this aspect of the problem. Dust might be blown in his eyes, but it would not blind him now. The murderer of little Ludovic Bewes would cringe in vain to him.

In any case a confession, if indeed Brooke contemplated such a thing, could now be no honest

one. Only the criminal's situation had inspired such a thought, just as only under the torture had Bitton wavered. Yet, none the less, Ringrose half suspected that some such design harboured in the mind of his opponent; and in that event he did not think twice concerning his own future actions. But the more he reflected upon Lord Brooke, the less he was disposed to believe that, once on The Eagle's Larder, he would waste time in any theatricals.

"I've got him where I wanted him, and where no doubt he wanted me; and to-morrow proves all," thought John as he turned over and swiftly slept.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE EAGLE'S LARDER

MAN rises early on the Italian lakes, and every hamlet glimmering at water level, or bowered among the mountain-craggs above, was engaged upon the unceasing task of earning its existence while yet the morning sky glowed with honeysuckle colours of dawn, and still the misty surface of Lugano lay deep in shadow. But presently the sun, burning away these vapours, flung out a glory of gold and turquoise upon the lake, where crept out little boats; and white steamers, like water-flies, sped over the surface, leaving threads of light behind them. From the shores thin bell music ascended, while gentian-blue against the forest gorges there rose the smoke of morning fires. The air was already trembling with heat when Ringrose set out for the landing-place, and he had scarcely boarded the sturdy little paddle-boat when she cast off and steamed upon her way.

Lord Brooke was aboard. He wore dark-grey knickerbockers and a Norfolk jacket; and he carried a pair of field-glasses slung in a case over his shoulder. He sat aft, but rose from his seat as John appeared, and shook hands with him.

"I feared you had changed your mind," he said.



He was subdued and in an abstracted and melancholy mood despite the splendour of the day.

John Ringrose expressed regret at cutting it so fine.

"To tell you the truth," he added, "your lordship gave me a good deal to think about last night."

"Call me 'Bewes.' What a rare morning! I have seen dawn in every country of the world save the Far north; but I think here it is most beautiful of all."

"Natural scenery interests you; you understand it, Mr. Bewes. But I'm afraid these things don't mean all they should to me. I gather that it is going to be devilish hot."

"A good day for the mountains. If you look up there to the south-east you can see the head of Monte Galbiga."

He pointed and John showed concern.

"Great powers! You don't mean we're going up there on our own legs!"

"No, not to the top. Our goal is more than two thousand feet below the actual summit. It's easy going if we strike a slow rate of progress. I'll make you forget the road."

At Porlezza they disembarked and Ringrose saw that the other had picked up a little brown woven square basket.

"What's that?" he asked.

"My luncheon."

"By Jove, I've brought none! I thought there would be a hostelry or inn up there."

Lord Brooke shook his head.

"An inn on The Eagle's Larder would have few clients but the birds of prey," he answered. "However, I shall have enough for both."

"Then I must do my part and carry the basket."

"We'll take turns at that. You shall do your share."

They had soon left the landing-stage, and Lord Brooke, to whom the way was familiar, proceeded by a short cut easterly. A couple of miles brought them above the farmhouses and cultivated ground, and presently they emerged upon a mountain road which the detective recognized. It was that by which he had travelled on his mule when twice he visited the aerie. The last wayside home of man was now beneath them and they proceeded at a slow but steady pace along the gradual gradient. Then, at a knee of the road, where it turned at an acute angle from east to west upon the immense bosom of the hills, Lord Brooke spoke suddenly.

"How much or how little of what I am going to tell you is already known to you, I cannot say," he began. "But that a great deal is known, I am sure. And first let me reveal that, while your real name and your ultimate purpose are hidden from me, this much is not. You are not called 'Fordyce,' any more than, when you stopped at Bridport in the winter, were you called 'West.'"

They eyed each other, but Brooke's expression was dull and his voice indicated indifference rather than vexation. John did not pretend surprise, though the opening was other than he had expected.

"Go on," he said.

"You are not astonished that I should tell you this? I only do so to strip the situation of absurdity and come to the truth, if you are as willing to divulge the truth as I am. The difficulty for me is enormous, because

in the light of reality, since you have in a sense conquered and I stand before you defeated, it may be impossible to make you believe my assurances, or indicate to you even a shadow of what my life has been during the past two years. It has been something so infernal, so horrible, so filled with mental torment that I do not exaggerate when I tell you that I am thankful the tale of my sufferings is nearly told."

Lord Brooke stood still for a moment, passed a silk handkerchief over his face, and looked with haggard eyes into the depths beneath, where Lago Piano, like a jade-coloured cat's eye, glimmered from its lashes of green rush.

"You are thinking," continued the younger man, "that an evil-doer, run to earth at last by your unsleeping genius, is going to confess his crime in hope that you will be touched with compunction and permit him to escape your hand. You are saying to yourself that here walks a craven and a coward, who, finding his secret sin in the keeping of another man, now confesses it and begs for mercy. That would be a natural assumption for you to make; but you wrong me if you make it. Many a terrible month before you sought the society of my late valet, Bitton; and long before you came to Brooke-Norton as 'Norman Fordyce,' I had sickened of the torture in my soul. And I ask for no mercy now. I am not even concerned to know how you discovered the accursed thing that I have done. You are right in your surmise as to the poor child; but you are mistaken as to your further suspicion that I destroyed his father. I had no hand in my brother's death, and may tell you, in confidence, that he destroyed himself. This fact, concealed for

his children's sake, and the credit of his family at the time, can be substantiated by Doctor Considine, who was the man that found the body. Certain incidents made it clear that poor Rupert took his own life; and it was from the place to which we are now climbing that he willed to throw himself and perish."

Lord Brooke stopped again, but still Ringrose did not speak. John cast a look, neither of scorn nor anger, upon his companion. His expression was one almost of sympathy. His head seemed bowed, as though part of the weight of the speaker's sin rested upon it also. He uttered one deep sigh and no more.

"I will speak of you first," proceeded the sinner. "Justice to myself demands that I should declare how remorse and unspeakable mental suffering were already tearing my heart before I knew of your existence; and that I state before my God as truth. I do not, however, expect you to believe it; but so it was. Thus it stood with me when I was suddenly confronted with the death of my accomplice under very mysterious circumstances. I knew Bitton through and through, as intimately as one man may know another; and when the terrific temptation came to me to remove my invalid nephew from my path and inherit the wealth he represented, I turned to this man. I did so because he had showed me, in many minor rascalities concerned with my hobby, that he had no more conscience than myself. But who can escape the possession of a conscience? We fondly imagine, while our hands are still clean, that we are not as other men, and that we stand on a plane above good or evil; but, my God! let us act upon that assumption, let us commit a crime before which the moral sense, inherent in



every man, is violated, and though we are hard as steel and slippery as ice, yet we shall surely suffer. I, at least, did not escape the furies. I committed a damnable crime, and I endured a punishment so damnable that I am thankful my conflict is ended and the sequel now in other hands. Death would be a feast after starvation now, and so it will be. Surely it must have been with Bitton as it is with me! He, too, hard-hearted and cunning devil though he was, must have found himself faced at last with such a horror and remorse at the thing he had done that his life was no longer bearable. And, in his case, I conceive that you were the instrument of justice—as you intend to be in my own.

“Whether he felt, before you entered into his life, as I have felt for the time that stretches behind me now like an eternity of hell, I do not know. Whether it was you who in some manner familiar to yourself alone quickened a conscience that would never have wakened but for your goading, I cannot tell. Your friendship and sympathy may have won his confession and so proclaimed him the vilest of men, to your surprise; or you may have gone to him actually aware of his horrible secret and determined to get it out of him. Probably that is what happened, and through channels, unknown alike to me or to him, you discovered what we both believed was hidden till doom. It does not matter who you are, or for whom you are working. I neither know nor care. What does matter is that now you stand to me as you doubtless stood to Bitton. You have learned the truth. At the touch of Ithuriel’s spear, I am revealed. And I am immeasurably thankful that it is so. I came to Lugano

two days ago to find you if it were possible; and why I guessed you might be here, I will tell you at the end of this story."

He spoke in a dreary, monotonous voice; but there was none the less a suggestion of relief in his tones as the narrative proceeded. He was breathing rather hard, and Ringrose suggested that they should stop for a little while and rest. Unconsciously Brooke had quickened his pace as he talked; but John felt no desire to be hurried.

"Sit down for ten minutes," he said. "I am following you very closely and I do not want to miss anything. What you say about me is true enough, Lord Brooke. But how do you know who I am?"

"I do not know who you are, save that you are the messenger of an outraged God," answered the other quietly. "What I have to ask from you is not your name, or your authority for the thing you have done. I shall put a very different request presently. For the minute I will tell you how I found out that I was under your scrutiny and how I associated you with the man mentioned in connection with Arthur Bitton's suicide."

They sat on a broad stone by the lonely way, and Ringrose listened while the other continued.

"When I first saw you in the hall at Brooke-Norton I felt no intuition of evil to myself, no sense of danger. Perhaps, had I done so, I might have welcomed you more warmly than was the case. But I did feel a subconscious sense that I had seen you before. I experienced the dimmest and most shadowy suspicion that I had met you—where, or when, I could not determine. I puzzled over it, for a man with my evil conscience looks out at his fellow man through very

different eyes from most of us. But the impression vanished on closer acquaintance and I ceased to wonder. I found you amazingly attractive and a type of perceptive and understanding humanity that had the art to charm me against my will. It is strange to say so, but I have seldom been happier in my life than during the hours you spent with me at my English home. What I told you last night is the truth; my heart responded to you and, for a time, I forgot my own misery. I was amazed afterwards to think how cheerful I had been.

“Then shortly before you left, while I was contemplating a future meeting, the veil suddenly lifted and an action of your own, like a flash of lightning revealed to me the truth about you. I came into my gallery unheard by you, found you there and discovered that you were carefully studying the Barthel ivory. What it meant to you, or how you associated it with Bitton or with me, God only knows; but what it meant to me was a terrific revelation—a thunderbolt out of a clear sky! It told me that you associated that hideous carving with larger issues, and it acted as a sudden and violent stimulus to memory. In a second I knew where I had seen you before. It was walking with Bitton in Bridport High Street. You had left him instantly as I stopped him and I had not seen you again; but I had asked him who you were and he had told me you were a new friend of his. And then I knew that the dead boy, Ludovic Bewes, was in your mind.

“You were now just about to leave Brooke-Norton, and to obviate any suggestion that I associated you with the Barthel ivory, I decided at the last moment

to buy Mrs. Campbell's piece—the Goldoni—and present you with a cheque. Thus I hoped, for the moment, to hide from you that I had discovered you and Bitton's friend were one. You departed, leaving me with my thoughts; and if I could have willed you back to me and seen you again, I doubt not that I should have told you the story I am telling now. There is a time in a criminal's life when he hungers horribly to share the knowledge of his wickedness with a fellow creature; and that time had long come to me. But, until then, I had met no man in whom I could confide, or to whom I could confess. Then I knew you were such a man.

"I do not need to be told that this is the strangest experience you have met with. It must be so. I do not even now ask to know your name. I know right well you doubt my honesty. But you will at least listen to the end."

"I am listening," answered the other. "It is perhaps my strangest experience, as you say."

"There is really little to add. I heard, on reaching Florence, that you had been there; and I quickly perceived, from old Rockley's gossip, that you had associated me with another but an imaginary crime—doubtless suspecting that the man who destroyed his nephew did the like for his brother. William Rockley was of course easy to interrogate. You learned from him certain facts concerning my movements and they tended to verify your new suspicions. You—traced me from Bologna to Lugano, by letters forwarded from the Hotel Cavour, and it was that circumstance which brought me here, because I guessed and hoped that I should find you. After all it matters little,



and you may believe that I killed my brother if you will."

"You deny that?"

"Absolutely. It was the death of my brother that put the thought of the subsequent crime into my mind."

"But you were at Lugano when he died?"

"That is true—about my ivories."

"And you have a final request to make to me, Lord Brooke?"

"I have—when we reach our destination. It is not much farther."

The mind of Ringrose was not revealed in his face. He had assumed such an expression as might be summoned by the narrative. He was gloomy, cast down, laconic and thoughtful; but natural, physical symptoms under the arduous climb declared themselves and could not be concealed. The sun and the exertion had made him very hot. He mopped his head as they reached the plateau, set down the basket which he had been carrying, and sought the shade of a thicket.

"Come with me a moment before we rest," said Lord Brooke, "and I will show you where my brother ended his life."

He walked in advance and presently stood at the edge of the precipice—so perilously near it that John warned him.

"You urge me to be careful," answered the other. "Why? Have the things that I told you moved you so little that you can still only regard me as a victim for the gallows? When I failed to find you, I resolved to come here a few days ago. I had already made up my mind to destroy myself, as my brother did. Now, in some strange way, I realise, since

meeting you, that with my confession to you has gone a sort of responsibility. I have put it upon you and feel committed to hear you before I act. That, at least, is how I feel about it. I am in your power, though I know you not. There was no obligation to place myself in your power. I might have fought you secretly; I might have conquered, and had you been any man than the man you are, I should have fought and I should have conquered, even though I followed Bitton into the unknown afterwards. But you have altered all that. You are not my enemy. I have done you no wrong. You are not concerned with a sinner, but his crime. I understand that and, therefore, I have made my confession and related the truth. And I ask you now, in sober seriousness—petition you—implore you—to let me do as I wish and take my own life in my own way. You have not inspired me to this resolve. You have not driven me to die, as you must have driven my accomplice. I had already come within an ace of self-destruction and resolved long since to cut my own life short; but you have brought the thing close and, as I say, if I did not feel under a curious sense of obligation, if I did not entertain for you a most sincere and inexplicable regard, I should not ask your leave, but jump over this precipice in your sight.”

“I understand the request—to permit your suicide—and I appreciate your attitude to me,” replied the other. “When we are faced with an experience such as this—a proposition unique on the earth perhaps—it is impossible to speak without the deepest consideration. It is true that I was the cause of Bitton’s death. You have been so frank with me that I will be frank with you.

How I discovered the truth concerning that child's end is no matter; but my purpose in associating with Bitton was to win from him the confession that I have now heard from you. I erred in my estimate of character, and the conditions that I created to reach his secret ended in my driving him to his death. Now you have told me what I expected to learn from him; and you say that you feel life no longer tolerable, even as he felt it. You ask me to let you do as he did, and to take my secret discovery to the grave with me when my own turn comes."

They had strolled away from the cliff and into the shade. Ringrose sat down, took off his coat and threw it beside him. Then he mopped his face again. The other slung off his field-glasses, turned to the luncheon hamper and opened it. He displayed a simple meal.

"You are hungry," he said. "Eat and drink and forget me for half an hour."

He drew his field-glasses from their case, stood up and strolled twenty yards to look into the valley. Their road was clearly indicated, zigzagging over the steep ascent beneath.

"May I help myself?" asked John, and without taking his eyes from the lifted glasses, Lord Brooke begged him to do so. When he returned a few minutes later, his companion was cracking walnuts, and an empty tumbler stood at his elbow. The mark of the red wine was on his upper lip. A sandwich or two had also disappeared.

"I've never been so thirsty in my life," he said. "Don't think I'm forgetting for a moment what you have told me, Lord Brooke. I'm only human

and, God knows, I have plenty of sins on my own conscience. We'll go into your terrible story presently. But physical needs must come first. I am a good deal distressed with such a climb. May I take another glass? We must drink fair, though."

"Go ahead. I'm not hungry or thirsty."

Ringrose poured himself more red wine from the bottle and his companion reclined and peeled an orange listlessly. John made an effort to be cheerful, but evidently impressed with the situation, soon relapsed into silence. Brooke was also very silent. Gazing down the acclivities, he noticed a movement far below, and jumping to his feet, again used the field-glasses.

Not men, but a dozen goats were wandering on the road a mile beneath. He returned and cast himself down beside Ringrose.

"What wine is that?" asked John, whose glass was empty again.

By way of answer the other prepared to fill it.

"No, no; it's your turn. I've had my share."

But Brooke insisted.

"You need it," he said. "It's only Chianti."

He filled John's glass again and then his own. For a time there was silence, while Lord Brooke broke a roll of bread and ate a little.

"Tell me," he said suddenly, "if I could have done otherwise than I have done, seeing the extraordinary influence you have exerted over me?"

But Ringrose did not reply, and, after he had lifted his glass and set it down empty, Lord Brooke turned to see a transformed companion staring at him. Once more John's glass was empty; but he had flung away his cigarette and was shrinking into himself with



curious, unnatural gestures. His face had grown pale and his eyes stared. His hands were fumbling about his neck.

"What the devil's amiss with me?" he said, trying to smile. "That Chianti's strong!"

And then the other in his turn suffered a sudden, complete transformation. His misery seemed to roll off him like a garment, and while Ringrose paled and appeared to sweat uneasily, and pressed a hand, first to his bosom and then his stomach, Lord Brooke's round face flushed and his eyes sparkled like polished gems.

"It's gone home—eh? Your thirst is quenched? The Chianti wasn't out of the common, but it contained a lethal dose of hyoscine, strong enough to settle a dozen busy rascals—John Ringrose—the great detective—among them!"

The other glared and strove to rise, but sank back again.

"I chose hyoscine because I wanted to talk to you before we said good-bye," continued Brooke.

Then from his pocket he brought out a photograph.

Meantime the other's head already fell forward drowsily. He made strenuous efforts to keep his senses and stretched for his coat, but Brooke drew it out of his reach.

"You'll be insensible in five minutes," he said, "and then you'll sink into coma and in half an hour, or less, you'll die. Quite painless. And then the pride of Scotland Yard will go over the cliff—to be found at some future time and doubtless lamented by the good wife you were writing to last night for my benefit—the wife who doesn't exist!"

John Ringrose flashed back looks of futile fury and his mouth opened, but only inarticulate grunts and gasps issued from it. There was a tremor beginning in his lower limbs. With a struggle he got to his knees and remained for a few moments in that position. Then he rolled over upon his side inert.

"Look!" cried the murderer. "Open your eyes once more and look at this picture of yourself, my good John. When I went to write Mrs. Campbell's cheque for the excellent Goldoni, I knew you were a wrong un, and I snapped a picture of you from my study window. Then I had it enlarged and sent to London; and a private inquirer there—such was your deserved fame—had no difficulty in letting me know my antagonist. You'll guess the rest now, how I——'

He broke off, for he was speaking to one obviously beyond reach of his words. The detective lay half upon his stomach, his hands clenched in the grass. He breathed stertorously and his legs still twitched. Lord Brooke, approaching the unconscious man, watched symptoms already familiar to him, then he kicked his conquered enemy in the side. Next he looked at his watch and, picking up his glasses, strolled down the plateau.

He smoked a couple of cigarettes, satisfied himself that no fellow creature shared that vast and sun-scorched loneliness, and presently returned. But John Ringrose had vanished, though evidence of his actions did not lack. It was clear that he could not stand; but he had crawled on his hands and knees behind the sumac trees, where the men had sat together, and so tumbled, or deliberately flung himself down the slope behind them. Here the ground shelved steeply over

barren steps of the limestone that, like a dragon's scales, covered the scree. Only a low juniper or two nibbled by goats and tufts of hoary lavender clothed this naked space, and it fell swiftly to the edge of the precipice. Beneath, the cliffs caved inward, and below them, after a sheer fall of five hundred feet, the glen beneath was full of spruce firs, reduced to the appearance of dark moss when seen from above.

Here was evidence of the thing Ringrose had done. Clear marks of his passing were indicated in the grass above and on the slope that sank from it. A dark trail showed in the patches of soil between the stony plates of the declivity. The line was clearly marked to the edge of the precipice, and through his glasses Brooke could trace every yard of it. Near the boundary he saw John's Panama hat a few yards from the edge of the cliffs; but the bruised earth showed farther yet to the brink. He crept down with infinite care, for the place was treacherous and each foothold of withered herbage as slippery as glass. The sloping stones were fiery hot under the sunshine, but no doubt existed as to the evidence of the victim's last act. He had gone over while alive—whether consciously or by accident could never be known. Regaining the plateau, Brooke again used his glasses and raked every yard of the glittering slope. Once he saw a movement at a small juniper, but it was only a great hawk, that flew off into the void as he focused upon it. He returned and examined the jacket of Ringrose. It contained only an hotel key, the key of the detective's kit-bag and a pocket-book. This afforded the searcher one item of interest. A receipted hotel bill from Menaggio, a small address book and a dozen Italian

stamps were all that it contained. But among the directions in the little book appeared one that held the investigator. He read, "Mr. J. Brent, the Old Manor House Hotel, near Bridport." The last address to be entered was that of the Cavour Hotel, Bologna.

Leaving the coat and its contents where John Ringrose had thrown them beside his cigarette case, Lord Brooke carefully cleared up the débris of the meal. The remains of the food he scattered; the two little drinking glasses he restored to the basket and, having emptied out the remaining wine, put the bottle with them. On his descent he dropped the bottle and the glass used by Ringrose into a cleft of the rocks. His own glass he cleansed carefully. Then he went on his way, his position secure in any event, since the wine meant death, whether Ringrose had fallen over the precipice, or found some hiding place beyond reach of sight from the plateau above.

Lord Brooke made some haste, that he might catch a homeward steamer from Porlezza. He succeeded, dined at Lugano and caught a midnight train for Milan.



## CHAPTER XX

### CONCERNING HYOSCINE

DOCTOR Ernest Considine found it impossible to sleep. The young man's affairs were becoming insupportable, and he began seriously to consider whether Ringrose's last instructions could be expected to weigh with him. A thousand growing dangers presented themselves, and for many hours the vision of Nicholas Tremayne came between him and repose. In the brief communication from Lugano, John had merely recorded the arrival of Lord Brooke, and directed Considine to 'sit tight' until they met; but this sedentary part, under the circumstances, proved almost impossibly difficult. A thousand plans succeeded each other interminably in the doctor's imagination, and love whispered—illogically as love will—that delay must be dangerous. On learning that the girl's uncle was at Lugano, Considine's instinct had been to set out instantly for Florence; but his duty to his profession and his obligations to Ringrose alike prevented any such unreasoned course. A very sick woman was upon his hands, and he knew that, in any case, to disobey the detective at this critical pass might do the gravest harm.

Then he determined to write a letter to Mildred, which she would receive during Lord Brooke's absence.

Indeed, he spent two hours on this composition; but only to destroy it when completed. Under the strain some native irresolution declared itself; but reason fought and conquered impulse. Seeing the circumstances which had ensured their separation, Considine finally determined that nothing less than a personal meeting was to be considered. Moreover, a letter from him at this juncture might create unknown dangers for Mildred and throw her off her balance in a way to arouse suspicions. In fine the doctor was constrained to 'sit tight' as he had been directed.

Worn out in mind, Considine at last slept. It was nearly three o'clock before his anxieties vanished in unconsciousness; but he had not slumbered for a quarter of an hour before his night bell wakened him. He sat up, aware that a sound had broken his sleep, yet not positive that it was the electric bell. He waited, therefore, until silence should send him to sleep again, or a repetition of the summons bring him out of bed. And then that happened to rouse him instantly.

At an earlier time, when Ringrose feared that they were too much together and their meetings might create a challenge, John had arranged to visit the doctor by night in a certain event. The need did not arise; but it was understood that if he came, he would signal by three short notes on the bell. And three short notes did Considine now hear. In his pyjamas he descended as swiftly as he might, opened his front door and stood face to face with a wayworn and haggard but contented mortal. So exhausted was his visitor, however, that he could only ask for support.

"Help me in," he said, "and get me food."

It was Ringrose—hatless, coatless, bedraggled and unutterably weary. But his mind triumphed over his body. He fell into Considine's armchair and stretched his legs in their torn trousers; he yawned and rubbed his aching muscles while the other turned on light. Food and drink were soon before the visitor, who had not as yet spoken. He devoured the flesh off a chicken wing, picking up the morsel in his fingers; he then disposed of a slice of fat ham, ate a roll and poured out half a tumbler of whisky, to which he added soda from a siphon.

The doctor watched silently. He had brought in a basin of hot water, soap and a towel, which waited John's attention, and now, while he washed his face and hands and cleansed his weary features from sweat and dirt, the wanderer spoke.

"I'm the most contented man on earth, doctor."

"Glad: but you don't look it."

"A little more time and you shall hear. Get me a pair of trousers and some socks and slippers. My feet are awful."

When Considine returned with the garments, John had divested himself of his ruined clothes and was sitting with his feet in the hot water.

"All's well, Considine. I've got him!" he said.

"'Got him!' Where?"

"Where I want him. Only a few details; but I know the result of them. Nothing more than infinite care is needed. At this moment I have very little doubt that his lordship is pretty nearly home again; but if you asked Lord Brooke where John Ringrose was, he wouldn't answer so accurately. A cigarette

and then listen. You kept your nerve and didn't write to her, or do anything mad?"

"I kept my nerve—somehow. And I did write to her; but I tore it up."

"The best thing to do with half the letters we write, doctor. If we tore up two letters out of every three, instead of posting them, we should find it pay us very well."

He smoked with shut eyes for five minutes and gently paddled his wounded feet. Presently he began to talk and, from his meeting with Lord Brooke at Lugano, to the journey up the mountain and the confession, Ringrose gave his listener a vivid and exact account of recent events. Then he continued:

"The man was so amazingly brilliant, and his remorse and all the rest of it—coupled with his apparent conviction that in me he had at last met his second self—all these influences, and the true ring of the broken voice in which he uttered them almost got me guessing for a time. I believe that I was sorry for the brute—saw the paramount difficulty which faced him—and, in those moments of emotion, half forgot the crime out of interest for the criminal. That was exactly what he wanted to happen. Yet it seemed so amazingly real for half an hour, that I found myself frankly wondering if it could be genuine. But I had only to ask that question to be answered. The cleverness was so obvious, though subtle, and the situation into which this move had thrown me so calculated. And then, of course, as he proceeded, I saw the naked truth. Two vital things I grasped tramping up that infernal mountain; and the first was the real purpose of this confession.



“His object was to distract my intelligence, weaken my will power and awake in me a state of deep and purely intellectual interest before the problem so suddenly set. If a man comes to you and confesses that he has committed a murder, and wants you alone to know what he has done, it is obvious that such a tremendous announcement is going to take you a little off your balance, shut your mind to all lesser considerations, and leave you to a considerable extent unarmed. Some men it would flatter, almost any man it must absorb. In fact, if an enemy intended to murder you, he could hardly plan a better way of leaving you open and defenceless than by filling your mind with such a terrible admission and posing before you as a contrite criminal, who throws himself on your sympathy and mercy. That is what our friend planned and that is what he did. And it mattered not a straw how many crimes he confessed, or how honestly he gave the details. Why? *Because he was talking to a dead man!* He was confiding in one whose lips would never again open to any other human being! The better the story and the deeper my attention, the weaker my own guard and the surer my own fate. To tell me what I knew already for truth was a masterly touch.

“And yet he didn’t admit his brother’s murder, you see. There was no need. He explained the carefully-kept secret, that it had been a suicide; and added that it was actually the late Lord Brooke’s death which inspired his own crime! Quite neat, and psychologically likely. Yet then it was, and only then, that the light shone suddenly and I knew, without possibility of doubt, exactly how he had killed his brother, and how he meant to kill me. He was going

to use the same means again! I had of course suspected—but now I was sure: the thing I longed for he meant to happen!

“I murmured commonplaces and created the impression that I was deeply moved. I had been so up to that point, but now I woke up. I led him to suspect that he had really weakened my guard. He pretended that the greatest service I could do him would be to let him destroy himself; but he indicated that, by some genuine affinity or attachment to me, he now regarded me as arbiter of his future, and that he would do nothing I did not sanction and direct. He implied that he was in my hands and thankful so to be. Wonderful bunkum it was! He stood at the edge of the precipice, so near that instinctively I bade him get out of danger. He obeyed. And then we came, quite naturally, to the bottle of wine. I was dying of thirst and he knew it. He spread the contents of the lunch-basket. And what do you think I saw then, doctor?”

“God knows,” murmured the other.

“I saw another luncheon-party on the same spot in the past. I saw the elder brother laugh and leave his own frugal lunch for the dainties the other had provided. I saw the bottle of wine opened and the big man take deep draughts, while the little man looked on. And then I saw the big man die and the little one remove his scarf, then drag him across that fifty yards till he got his burden over the cliff. Next I saw Burgoyne Bewes blindfold the horse with his brother’s wrap and send the steed after its master; and finally I saw him clear up the fragments of that luncheon to the last walnut shell. That’s what I saw.

"Lord Brooke set out our meal, then took his field-glasses and sauntered away. He was so positive. I asked him if I might help myself and that made him more confident. We both were striving to be cheerful under his confession and my great mental perturbation on hearing it. We each did the right thing. It should always be remembered as a classic bit of double crossing, doctor. Anyway, it ought to be. He thought he had created the needful distraction in my mind, and I knew he thought so.

"When he came back my glass was empty and my lip stained with red wine. The two little drinking-glasses he'd set out were of different patterns. What did that mean? That he'd bought one on the way to the boat. He gave me that one. It wasn't going back. The people at the hotel were not aware that Brooke intended to have a friend on his ramble. I gasped and indicated thirst. Lord knows that wasn't acting. He filled my glass again presently for the third time. You see the first glass had gone into my pocket-handkerchief, and that into my trousers pocket."

"Poison! The handkerchief?"

"Just so. Here it is, you see—dry now; but that doesn't matter. The poison's there. I filled my glass and he filled his own. Something challenged him just then—Providence in the shape of goats. He thought it might be mountain men coming our way and resented the chance of company. But his mind was quickly relieved. He found my second glass emptied and filled it again. 'We must drink fair,' I said. But he'd peeled an orange and preserved his pensive attitude. His back was turned to me and

I saw him lift his glass presently and appear to drink. I could only see the gestures and his head thrown back and his empty glass put down; but of course he'd emptied it into the grass before he lifted it—just as I had myself. Then I ate a walnut and took a sandwich into my hands. While he was looking through his field-glasses the first time, I'd hidden two sandwiches, thinking the poison might possibly be in them also. You'll guess neither crumb nor drop of that banquet passed my lips.

“And now I had to begin my performance. I didn't know the poison, but I knew, as well as I know my feet are raw, that the wine was poisoned; and if you drink three glasses of poisoned Chianti you must act according. I indicated general uneasiness and misery, and he was so sure now that he didn't wait to see if my reactions were all correct. Those are the tiny details—almost inhuman—that escape even the greatest crook.

“He threw off his melancholy, grinned in my face, nearly cut a caper and told me that my wine included a generous dose of hyoscine. It was foolish of him, because, if I'd chosen the poison myself, I couldn't have hit on a better for my own purpose. He now let me know exactly how to behave. He enjoyed himself immensely. But so did I. I know the symptoms of every poison—part of my business, doctor, as it is part of yours—and when I understood that I was now dying of hyoscine—why, very properly, I began to die of hyoscine!

“He knew I shouldn't be conscious another five minutes, so he made hay while the sun shone, told me who I was and how he had found out who I was.



He'd trailed me all right, doctor! He'd snapped me through a window with his camera just before I left Brooke-Norton, and he'd had it enlarged and identified. So then he understood I meant business. But I couldn't hear any more. I disappointed him there! I rolled over, dead to the world, and began a tidy imitation of a death rattle, and he perceived that I was beyond the reach of any more earthly information. Then the gentleman kicked me. If he had kicked me again, I'm much afraid I should have taken the law into my own hands; but he happily didn't. Once was enough—a natural little triumph.

"He played my game from that minute in a way for which I can never sufficiently thank him. He looked at his watch, noticed the tremor in my limbs gradually subsiding, then strolled to the other end of the plateau and left me to die in peace. That was a little delicacy of feeling I had hardly hoped for. But not knowing what might happen on *La Sporta dell' Aquila* when the time came, and always sanguine, as you will remember, that it would come, I had studied the place and every stick and stone on it during the two visits I made after our first one together. I knew the spot no doubt far better than anybody living but the eagles themselves; and now I availed myself of that knowledge.

"I had to act the part of a dying man in his last paroxysm. If I had really taken all that poison, what I now did would have been impossible; but a little medical detail like that was not going to destroy the illusion for Lord Brooke. I knew every hole and corner, remember, and I knew that immediately behind our resting-place and the sumac bushes the ground shelved steeply to another precipice. I had

risked my neck there before, little thinking that certain painfully-acquired knowledge was to prove so valuable.

"Now, the moment our friend had removed himself, I got to my knees and crawled heavily through the shrubs and down the slope. I took pains to leave a spoor that would be easily followed, and I left my hat near the brink of the cliffs, where they bend in underneath. From this spot I went forward on my feet and avoided anything but hard stone, till I reached the shelter of a small, flat juniper bush whose arms swept the ground. It was but two feet high—an object barely large enough to conceal a man; yet able to conceal him in every particular. I was fast under it, curled up and invisible, exactly three minutes after I left the plateau.

"Lord Brooke would follow the tracks; he would assume that, with my last fading instinct of mind and impulse of body, I had crawled away from him and either chosen to die by my own hand, or already half blind and semi-conscious, fallen unwittingly to my death. Whatever he thought, it was certain that my disappearance was not going to vex him. It matters little what action a man may take who has consumed a lethal dose of poison beyond power of antidote.

"For twenty minutes I waited, then he appeared at the top of the slope. He raked it with his glasses, then himself descended very cautiously and followed my track to the brink of the precipice. It satisfied him. He studied the place again when he got to the top and looked at my juniper bush carefully. He had seen a movement; but it was that of a hawk sitting a

foot above me and unconscious of my presence. A stone was not more still than I. The bird flew away and presently his lordship disappeared. No doubt he returned to the scene of our entertainment and studied the contents of my coat; but there was nothing in that to interest him save an address in a little notebook. My handkerchief he might possibly have missed! that was in my trouser pocket soaked with his wine. But the government expert will have something more than my handkerchief to interest him—eh, doctor?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you need to know? Among the properties of hyoscine is one peculiarity invaluable to us. You're not a toxicologist, Considine?"

"Not a skilled one."

"Every medical man ought to be. Poison symptoms should be as familiar to you, in all their delicate differences, as any other symptoms."

"Hyoscine is a product of henbane," said the physician, "a hypnotic. We used it a great deal in the war. It was good for cerebral excitement, mania and shell shock."

"It's rather famous stuff," explained Ringrose. "With some vegetable poisons they find it practically impossible to discover chemical evidence after death; but in the case of hyoscine, that can be done. So you'll judge that I was rather gratified to get his lordship's information."

"Chemical analysis would find it—but after how long?" asked Considine.

"After years," replied the other. "Crippen is the classic case. So now you see what I meant when I said I'd got him."

The doctor nodded.

"And he thinks you're dead?"

"Yes; and it is vital that he should continue to think so. The secrecy that needs to be maintained to the finish must be absolute. In fact, I almost despair of maintaining it. I can trust one man and one only. The average official, even in the Secret Service, doesn't know the meaning of real secrecy; but now and again you run up against somebody in power who appreciates it."

"Can I help you in any sort of way?"

"You must. I want clothes and I want to get back to England by a roundabout route—starting to-morrow."

"You might take my motor-boat and go up to Colico. The rail is only six hundred yards from the lake. From there you go to Chiavenna and Splügen Pass; and so through the Engadine."

"Good! That would do well. Can you run me up after dark to-morrow?"

"Yes: and meantime?"

"Meantime I'll stop here and sleep. You have no staff—only your old woman who comes presently to do your chores and make your breakfast. Can you put me somewhere out of her reach?"

"Not here. She might poke about anywhere; but there's a good snug hole in the roof of my boat-house where you'd be all right and absolutely safe. We'll take rugs and get cushions from the boat. I'll bring down plenty of food later, and you'd better have a suit of my clothes. They'll only be a bit tight in the waistband and long in the leg. I've got a complete new outfit."



Ringrose nodded.

"That will do. Then I can drop into the boat to-morrow night; and if you have a time-table I'll take it with me and look up the journey. Boots you'll have to buy for me. Yours are too small, and I shall want a roomy pair. Pack this handkerchief in a piece of oiled silk. I'll take it with me."

The day had broken and, groaning at his feet, John limped off beside Considine to the boathouse, distant but a quarter of a mile. Nobody stirred as yet, and a fog wandered in billows over the lake. The doctor carried rugs and spoke as they went.

"You say there's one man you can trust in England? May I ask who?"

"My old chief—still in command at the Yard, thank goodness! Red tape might ruin all, for we've got to do some things that mean officialdom; but when Sir James has heard my yarn he'll put it over the Home Office. The Director of Public Prosecutions, Sir Hubert Matherson, is a pal of his, and between them they'll give me a free hand—at least I hope and pray so."

In the boathouse, while Considine arranged a comfortable bed, Ringrose indicated his intentions.

"What must be done you know without my telling you. It's often done, of course, but always with a lot of fuss and publicity. The papers make the most of it and reporters go to the scene and the illustrated rags photograph everybody concerned. In this case, for mighty good reasons, I want to conduct an operation so privately that Brooke-Norton itself will know nothing."

"It ought to be fairly easy."

"It ought—if the secret is kept. As we are concerned with a vault and not a grave, our job is simple. Half a dozen of us go there by night and get into the mausoleum, and shut the door behind us. We open the late Lord Brooke's coffin, remove what is necessary, and put all shipshape in half an hour. Then back to London with a motor-car. In a fortnight, or less, the Government pathologists find their hyoscine, and the warrant is issued. But the whole point is still the secrecy. I don't want any extradition trouble and delay. The rascal has plenty of friends in Italy to help him give us the slip even after arrest. My idea is to have him shadowed until his return to England, and then nabbed at Dover."

"Good luck. Now you must sleep, Ringrose. You've asked yourself to do a good bit more than a man of fifty-five has any right to attempt."

"Waiting is hard for you," answered the other kindly, as he stretched himself and yawned. "I haven't forgotten all this means to you, doctor. But you have no need to be anxious. Tremayne was a gentleman, and nothing will happen at earliest until the parties go home. I'll watch your end for you. If the young man's in England, I may get into touch; if he's in Florence, then we mustn't move till Brooke is arrested. Nothing till then. You may hear that a Mr. Fordyce is missing at Lugano and so on, but take no notice. I hope they'll publish the fact. When I left the hotel I said I was going up to Santa Margharita, so that's where they'll inquire. You're all right, and the moment he's in quod, you're free to go your own way—perhaps sooner. Trust me."

His words came dully from the edge of sleep, and before Ernest Considine had left the boathouse and locked it behind him John was unconscious.

After noon the doctor returned with food and drink and a bundle of selected garments. Ringrose still slept profoundly, and though Considine removed his slippers and dressed his bruised feet John did not wake. Seeing that the sleeper's watch had stopped, Considine wound it up and set it by his own. He then wrote a few words on a piece of paper, indicating that he would return at ten o'clock that night, and once more departed, after seeing that the motor launch was ready. A train left Colico for the north at half an hour before midnight.

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE GHOST AGAIN

It wanted but a fortnight of the date on which he last visited the Old Manor House Hotel when a motor-car containing John Ringrose drew up at that ancient porch. Exactly as he had done a year ago, John alighted briskly, looked to his luggage and his gun-case, and was about to enter, when the mighty bulk of Mr. Jacob Brent filled the entrance. The innkeeper extended a solemn greeting and declared his pride at entertaining Mr. Ringrose once again. He held the visitor's hand and gazed into his face with awe.

"A marked man before," he said, "but you've grown that famous you'll never conceal yourself now, John Ringrose—not even here."

"I told you to keep your mouth shut, Jacob."

"So I did; but murder will out, you know."

"And how's Mrs. Bellairs?"

"Fine. They took her evidence. Came up here to do it—a great affair."

"But she's none the worse?"

"Only terrible excited to see you."

"And the shooting?"

"There's a score of men—quality included—will be proud for you to go among their pheasants."



"I want nothing of that sort. I'm here to see you and work."

"Work! My wig! Haven't you had enough work?"

"Writing, Jacob—penmanship, my boy! I was always hankering for something a bit out of the common to finish with, so that my readers should get their money's worth."

"Well, now they'll have it, and good measure; but mind you mention the Old Manor House, John."

"Fear not, Jacob. The yarn begins under your roof; and I wish it ended there."

"You're going to give me a leg up, you know, when that book comes to be read."

"Don't you be too sure of that, my friend. What about the ghost? There are plenty of people who don't like haunted houses, let me tell you!"

"You can leave out the ghost. Maybe you'd better."

"Leave out the ghost! Why—the ghost is the backbone of the business. All turned on the ghost."

"Well, you laid it."

"How do I know? You've given me the same room as before?"

"Of course, John. As you commanded. Nothing's changed. A score have slept there since you did; but there's been no talk of ghosts, I promise you."

They drank tea presently and discussed various topics.

"Since this affair," declared Mr. Brent, "our tea business has increased out of knowledge. You've made a lot of money for me and I won't deny it. And you'll stop here as my guest, and not my customer,

just my honoured guest for as long as you've a mind to do so."

"We'll not quarrel about that, Jacob."

John Ringrose was back in the old room half an hour later, and he surveyed its simple details curiously.

"A queer starting place for the adventure of my life," he said to Brent. And then, after the landlord had poked the fire, drawn the curtains and gone his way, the new arrival repeated the actions taken on his former visit. He disposed of his garments, stowed them in the chest-of-drawers and hanging cupboard; he placed his cartridges and gun-case at the bottom of the cupboard; he arranged his books, dispatch-box and leather desk upon a table opposite the window. Two hours later, at the rumble of a gong, he went to dinner, and when the trim shape of Miss Manley appeared pushing the invalid's chair, John greeted both mistress and maid with exceeding friendship.

"Not an hour older—neither of you," he said. "And, if you please, I'll come and talk in the drawing-room presently."

"We really do deserve to hear, don't we?" asked Mrs. Bellairs, her eyes bright with genuine emotion as she looked at the man. "We know much—all that the rest of the world knows; but we want to ask a thousand questions."

"And perfectly justified—perfectly justified," declared John. "But for you, madam, and you, Miss Susan, there would be nothing whatever to tell; and I shouldn't have known how to finish my book."

Other guests were stopping at the inn, and for that reason John agreed to spend a part of the evening in the private sitting-room of Mrs. Bellairs. He

arrived half an hour after dinner and found every preparation for his comfort.

"There is but one condition," declared the old lady. "You must smoke your cigar while you talk."

"You understand," he said, "that I consider I owe to you and your friend the first and fullest and most complete account of everything. Miss Manley must listen too. It has stretched out into a pretty long tale, ma'am, since I came and left the Old Manor House this time last year; but unfortunately it's not the best sort of tale, because, though it's got a good beginning and a nice middle, there isn't any end. My work's not done—perhaps it never will be. But you'll hardly hear all I've got to tell you in one night, or two either, for I'm going over every mortal thing that happened to me and those two men, from the time I left here to the drop of the curtain at Dorchester."

"We well knew you'd remember us, Mr. Ringrose," answered Mrs. Bellairs. "Susan and I were very certain indeed."

"And right to be."

Then, while the women listened to each syllable—Susan with her hands in her lap and Mrs. Bellairs holding her smelling-bottle—he began his story.

But, with John's remorseless memory for detail and infinite care to state, not only events, but also the thoughts and theories provoked in his mind by them, he did take a very long time. It was clear that several evenings must elapse before the tale was told; and on this first evening he had only finished with Arthur Bitton by midnight.

Mrs. Bellairs lamented his need for delay, but Susan approved it.

"It's like the beautiful moving pictures that go on for a week, till you know the heroes and heroines as well as you know yourself," she said.

On the fifth evening of the narrative, Mr. Ringrose brought it to an end.

"I left off in Doctor Considine's boathouse last night," he began, "and what's yet to tell you shall hear before you go to bed, Mrs. Bellairs—though the most of it, of course, is public property now. I slept like the dead all that day—so sound that I didn't know the doctor had been looking after my feet till I woke up and found he had. And I'm supposed to be a detective, that never sleeps but with one eye open!

"To Colico he brought me through the dark, and from there, by way of Chiavenna and the Splügen Pass and the Maloga Pass, I said good-bye to Italy."

"I know it all—I've been that way, Mr. Ringrose."

"It was a good bit wasted on me—the scenery was," confessed John. "But home I came with my plans pretty well shaped. I didn't go to my own diggings, nor yet to the Yard, because, though safe enough, there was a right and a wrong way for every step. I didn't forget his lordship had set a private inquiry agent after me in the past, and might, to make all sure, be just interested to know if my ghost was in its old haunts. No; I went to a pal and lay doggo, as we say, and wrote to my old chief, Sir James Ridgway, and told him I must have a mighty long talk with him and mighty soon. I explained that I couldn't come to the office; but begged he would see me some night at home. Well, he knew me, and he knew I knew what his time was worth. I went to dinner with



him at his orders the very next night and you'll believe I interested him a great deal. And I went to dinner again three nights later, and there was a third party there that time. Sir Hubert Matherson, Director of Public Prosecutions; it was, and between 'em they got what I wanted from the Home Office, and all secret—secret as the grave! In fact, never was there such beautiful secrecy before, ladies—a triumph over the criminal and the public and the newspapers and everybody!”

Mr. Ringrose gloated at this essential detail.

“Five went down,” he continued, “and we took the needful. Four picked men, including myself, and Professor Murgatrode, the Government pathologist, who insisted on coming—such was the learned man's zeal. We were outside Brooke-Norton at one o'clock in the morning on the last day of August, and happily it was a rough and dark night. I knew the family mausoleum, because I'd seen it when I was down there. It stood but two hundred yards from the house, in a glade of the park lands. Our car was left up a lane outside the village with the driver—a policeman—to guard it. At the tomb we picked a simple lock and got inside and shut the door behind us. Then we saw the last coffins of the Bewes folk—a big one, made in Italy, and a little one, made at Bridport. And we knew that the murdered child slept beside his murdered father. A solemn moment for me, and I felt it I do assure you when I stood beside those dead.

“The point was to leave all as we found it to a hair; and it may interest you in the ways of the police to hear that, among our outfit, was a pail of water and a couple of towels. Why? So as we

should cleanse the marble floor of the place after we had finished. Didn't want any muddy boot-marks, you see, for any chance comer or caretaker to mark, and perhaps make a fuss and communicate with Lord Brooke. Not a grain of dirt or a pinch of sawdust did we leave behind us.

"The coffin was soon opened and what the doctor needed he was able to gather in his jars. And then and there he sealed them under our eyes in the light of the electric torches. The body lay on a shelf, waist-high, and we never moved the coffin. The fine dust I gathered off the lid before we opened it, I shook back again when we had screwed it down. No doubt if a trained man had known what was done that night, he might have found many signs of it afterwards; but to the casual and unsuspicious sight we left not a trace.

"We were back at the car in an hour and a half, and in London by dawn. Then came the analysis; and since his lordship had been generous of his poison, the truth was laid bare.

"Only nine men in England knew it till the day after Lord Brooke landed at Dover. That was three weeks later; and I stood among the party who took him. When he saw me, he was very wonderful. A good bit surprised without doubt, but never for an instant did he lose his nerve. 'You didn't drink?' he said. 'No, your lordship, I did not,' I answered. He held out his hands quite quietly for the bracelets. But he was only interested in me. 'Where were you?' he asked. 'Under one of the little juniper trees on the slope,' I told him, but he felt doubtful. 'They wouldn't have hid a rabbit,' he said. 'One hid me,

your lordship,' I answered him, ' the one the big hawk flew from.'

"He knew the game was up then, and it says a great deal for the intellect of the man and his lightning cleverness that, even in a terrific moment like that, he could follow the argument and see the logical process that had landed him. 'An autopsy on my brother?' he asked. He'd seen it in a flash. 'Yes, your lordship,' I said. 'Hyoscine.'

"'You've hanged me, Ringrose,' he said.

"'I hope so, your lordship,' I answered.

"Then they took him away."

"But the poor girl," cried Mrs. Bellairs. "Do break off and tell us about that unhappy child. She was with him at Dover; but we know no more about her."

"That was rather sad—decidedly sad, ma'am," answered John.

"Sad? Don't say that!"

"Not for her, nor yet for the good doctor; but for young Mr. Nicholas Tremayne. I couldn't get to him, though I tried. He was away from his home and I judged he must be in Italy. But he wasn't. He happened to be in Scotland. He stood on the quay at Dover waiting for the boat, however. And so did Doctor Considine, you see. I'd telegraphed to him at Aix, where he was by now. I bade him come, out of friendship to them both, because I reckoned that Mildred Bewes might want a friendly hand just about then. So he came over and ate his heart out till we heard from the man we had sent to Florence, that Lord Brooke was homeward bound. Joe Ambler we sent—a rising chap. He came back in the same train and wired from Paris that the party was on the way.

"Well, the boat was sighted, and there was Considine, and there was Tremayne, and twenty-five minutes to wait. So I introduced them. The doctor told me afterwards in London that they brought back Miss Mildred Bewes between them by a later train and took her home."

"And it was all right?" asked Susan.

"Very right indeed for the lovers, ladies. They are going to be married next spring."

Mrs. Bellairs sighed and smelled at her salts.

"I'd like to see that dear girl," she said. "Go on, Mr. Ringrose; but we know the rest."

"Not all—I don't myself, worse luck. And I never shall, I fear. As for the trial and the defence of course you do know. In a way it was only my word against his; but there happened to be such a powerful lot behind my word. His counsel's argument was ingenious, but it couldn't hold. He said, what is true, that it is well known a suicide will use two means to kill himself. There are examples of a man cutting his throat and then jumping over a bridge, or flinging himself under a train; and some have drunk poison and then blown their brains out, and so why not drink poison and then jump off a precipice? But, against that supposition, there was the hyoscine in my pocket-handkerchief as well as in the dead body. And the fearful story of Bitton and the boy—that couldn't be got over. He was the first peer of the realm who has met his death on the scaffold for more years than I know. They're a law-loving class as a rule—the peers of the realm.

"He died like a gentleman, but declined benefit of clergy. He asked for a book, written by somebody



of the name of Gobineau, and read it very steady to the end. He confessed after the usual appeal failed. It's always pleasanter with circumstantial evidence when they are graciously pleased to do that. I don't think he much minded going, myself. Life had given him pretty near all the ivories in the market. But one very amazing thing he did—the most amazing that any of my murderers ever thought of doing. He made a codicil to his will and left a memento."

"To whom?" asked Mrs. Bellairs.

"To me, ma'am!"

John took something out of his pocket—a jeweller's case. He opened it and laid it before Mrs. Bellairs.

"Prepare for a shock," he said. "It's the Barthel ivory."

The old women bent their heads over the curio with horrified ejaculations.

"'To John Ringrose, in recognition of genius, from an admirer.' Those were his written words. Handsome—eh? The sentiments, I mean, not the ivory."

"It's that awful thing again; and none the less awful for being so little," murmured Miss Manley.

"Worse—worse!" declared her mistress.

"Yes, there's a snap about it that neither your picture nor my puppet ever had."

Mr. Ringrose shut the ugly object out of sight.

"So there I stand—and the mystery as far off solution as ever," he said. "Surely there never happened a stranger thing. I get through a fairly tough proposition, and the people are pleased with me; but I'm not pleased with myself—very far from it. Because the starting point, the egg of the whole affair is not hatched yet. I mean the voice of that unhappy

little child. Either I've got to get to the bottom of that, too, or else I must frankly confess there's no bottom and go over, like a lamb, to the Spiritualists. They're claiming me already, for that matter. I hear that scores of people since the trial have become believers. And I don't want to join 'em—every instinct in me kicks against it, ladies!"

"Have you heard the voice again?" asked Mrs. Bellairs.

"I have not. I hope I never shall."

"You might, however."

"Please God, no, ma'am."

Then Mrs. Bellairs looked at her companion.

"Shall we, Susan?" she asked.

"Now or never," answered the other shortly.

The elder put down her smelling-bottle and her white, beautiful old face took a delicate tone of colour.

"My friend," she said, "listen to me and carry your thoughts back a whole year. After the death of little Ludo and the attitude his terrible uncle took to our intervention, Susan and I felt that we could do nothing. We were old and unimportant, and unimportant old people don't get a hearing very easily. Time passed and our suffering was dulled, but we never forgot. I prayed about it—yes, indeed, often I did; and when I heard that you, of all men, were coming to stop under this roof, I felt that my prayer was answered. It's true that you had told Jacob Brent not to say anything about who you were; but you know him. The truth was much too wonderful for Jacob to keep to himself. You were his greatest hero even then, and he let out your identity to Susan—in profound secrecy. So of course I very soon

learned it. And then I surely knew that you had been sent! And God helps those who help themselves; so Susan and I set our wits to work."

John's eyes were fixed upon the speaker and his iron memory began to revive every detail. He gravely doubted, but kept silence while Mrs. Bellairs continued.

"I knew the chatter of an old woman wouldn't interest you; but I did think and hope that a ghost might. My idea was that if the ghost came first, and I was presently able to offer a dreadful reason for the ghost, then you'd listen. And you can judge of my feelings when I found you were quite prepared to do so."

"But wait, wait, ma'am! Details—details!" cried Mr. Ringrose.

"You shall have them. The first night that you were here, when we knew you must be asleep, Susan wheeled me into the room next your own and I cried loud and clear from the wall cupboard. Between the cupboard and your room, the wall is of no thickness at all, as you know, and to you the voice sounded as though it was actually near you. Instantly Susan wheeled me away again; therefore when you examined the passage, the room next your own, and the cupboard, we were safely gone."

"That's sound; but what about the second time? I had the key of the room, and the door was locked."

"There was another key, which Susan secured without anybody knowing she had done so. Brent has duplicate keys of all the rooms. The second time that Susan wheeled me into that room, she deposited me safely on pillows in the cupboard. Then she trundled my chair away and locked the door after her.

There was a dreadful risk, but we took it. When she was gone, I gave my imitation of the little dead boy and hoped for the best. You came presently, unlocked the door and flashed your torch round the room, but you made no examination that time. If you had, you would have found me lying quite helpless though well wrapped up at the bottom of the cupboard. But you didn't; and when you had gone and locked the door again, Susan waited till you were asleep and then brought back my chair and took me away."

"And how did she know that I was asleep?" inquired John, sternly regarding the old maid.

"Nothing like honesty, Mr. Ringrose," she said. "You snore very loud, sir."

He looked at her.

"That's bad—a detective oughtn't to snore, Miss Manley," he confessed. Then, still troubled, he turned again to the elder lady.

"But the voice—the child's agonized voice—the throb and frenzy and tingle in it that made my blood run cold? And, afterwards, the amazing acting, when I told you my experience and you were so astounded to hear it that you nearly fainted?"

The old woman smiled at him.

"Do you know who I am?" she asked. "You've told us it's so vital to begin at the beginning of a case, Mr. Ringrose; but you never thought to begin at the beginning of me—that was too far back, perhaps?"

"I did suspect you—till I saw how you took my story."

"But you would have suspected a great deal more if you had begun at the beginning, wouldn't he, Susan?"



"He'd have done it, madam. I dare say he's come back to do it now, if we knew the truth."

"And who are you, Mrs. Bellairs?" asked John rather blankly.

She answered with another question.

"Do you remember the palmy days of burlesque at the Momus Theatre, or are you too young? Did you ever hear of Minnie Merry, who played the street boys and ragged gamins, and made such a study of children, and won kind words for her Joe in *Bleak House*? Dear Susan was her 'dresser' then—and still is."

"Good Powers! I fell in love with you in my 'teens," said the detective.

"And you're rewarded, you see. I played my very last and saddest part for you alone."

Mr. Ringrose jumped to his feet impulsively and took the hand of the ancient actress between his own. His eyes shone.

"You plucky wonder!" he said.

"And there won't be no need for you to believe in ghosts after all, sir," remarked Susan.

THE END

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By GILBERT FRANKAU

Author of "Peter Jackson, Cigar Merchant," "Gerald Cranston's Lady," etc.

"Life—and Erica" is undoubtedly the most human novel which Gilbert Frankau has so far written. But it is something more than this. It is an analysis, pitiless yet accurate, of the modern spirit in modern womanhood. Most readers will quarrel with it, and a few will positively hate it, but the majority will agree that Mr. Frankau has accomplished the task which he set himself. The fact that this book ends on a strong religious motive will not come as a surprise to those who have studied this author's other works as they deserve to be studied—thoroughly.

### **The Treasure of Ali Mubarak**

By RAYMUND M. CLARK

Here is a brilliant and vividly-written story of a treasure hunt in Egypt, which tells of two young men in Government employ who are given an ancient document by an old Shèikh to whom they were of service. Filled with curiosity and an adventurous spirit, they endeavour to translate the mysterious paper. Upon slender and obscure instructions they set off in search, but progress is retarded by the outbreak of the Great War. Some few years later, the two friends are again thrown together, and they renew their search. Many terrible yet exciting adventures befall them, including their gruesome experience with the raving Satyr who steals clothes from corpses. Some magic spell—a curse in fact—protects the hidden treasure, and the culmination of the thrilling episodes makes impressive reading.

### **Doctor Ricardo**

By WILLIAM GARRETT

Author of "Friday to Monday."

Here is a fine thrilling original detective story. Mystery after mystery peeps out at the reader from every page, and thrill after thrill carries the action along at break-neck speed to the final exciting *dénouement*. It is the story of how Drew, the famous detective, solves the mystery of the murder of Louis Farrell. There are many false clues and blind alleys before the murderer is finally run to earth. When he is, the final scene turns out to be thrilling and unexpected to the reader and characters alike.

### **Queen of the Dawn : A Love Tale of Old Egypt**

By H. RIDER HAGGARD

Author of "Heu-Heu, or The Monster," "Wisdom's Daughter," etc.

This is a book of that romantic and mystic type which Rider Haggard has made peculiarly his own. It tells of Old Egypt and its Shepherd King. The heroine, daughter of the legitimate king, is forced to flee from the palace owing to the tyranny of the People of the Dawn. She goes to live among the Pyramids, and there is seen by the son of the Shepherd King, who has come with an Embassy. For her sake he incurs the wrath of his father, and in the end their love heals the feud which exists between their two peoples.



## Hutchinson's New Novels. 7/6 Net

### Vagabond Harvest

By URSULA BLOOM

Author of "The Great Beginning," etc.

In her latest book the author of "The Great Beginning" has taken a new theme round which to weave her story. For this story emphasises that, among the many things which claim attention at the present day, the things that really matter are still life and love. Hedda, the beautiful Zigani gipsy, loves Raphael, a dreamer, a musician, and a violinist of genius. In a weak moment, tempted by the lure of gold and jewels, she puts aside her rustic lover and marries a man who has wealth and position but a selfish and scheming nature. Later she leaves him and returns to her gipsy, leaving behind, however, her child. The *dénouement* of this story is written with skill, and brings to a close in a surprising manner a well-told story.

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### The Villa by the Sea

By ISABEL C. CLARKE

Author of "Carina," "Anna Nugent," "Children of the Shadow," etc.

The scene of Miss Isabel Clarke's new long novel is laid in Italy in a lonely villa by the sea. Donald Harnett, the supposed son of Professor and Mrs. Harnett, grows up there in complete ignorance of the secret of his birth. He has no experience of any other life until at the age of twenty-one he goes to England to stay with some cousins. He returns to the villa bringing with him his cousin Pauline, now an orphan. An averted crime leads to strange disclosures, and the story ends in happiness for the chief characters.

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### Soundings

By A. HAMILTON GIBBS

This is the story of the spiritual and sexual adventures of a clever girl before and during the War. She meets and loves a young Oxford undergraduate, but he refuses to marry her. She still loves him, but devotes herself to art and becomes a well-known and popular painter. Then, during the War, she again meets her former lover, and feeling that he is the one man in the world for her she asks him to marry her. Her constancy after his brutal behaviour wakes true love in his heart, and so she gains happiness in the end. Like his distinguished brothers, Sir Philip Gibbs and Mr. Cosmo Hamilton, the author has a fine literary style.

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### The Seven Sleepers

By "ASRAK"

It is rarely that one gets a really brilliant detective story. "The Seven Sleepers," however, may be regarded as of this order. It tells of the machinations of a cold, hard, astute villain and the efforts which are made to bring him to justice. The author has a remarkably engaging style and carries his readers along from one thrill to another with great skill. The ending, too, is startling in its originality.

## Hutchinson's New Novels. 7/6 Net

### The Canoe Builders

By H. de VERE STACPOOLE

Author of "Ocean Tramps," "Golden Ballast," etc.

"The Canoe Builders" is the last and strangest of the three complete novels that form the "Blue Lagoon" trilogy, books unlike any other books, dealing with the Pacific Ocean of the time of Pease and Steinberger and exhibiting Nature and Nature's people under the steadily-growing menace of civilisation. "The Canoe Builders" shows the last stand of the canoe against the sailing ship.

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### Following the Grass

By HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

Author of "Out of the Silent North," "Suzanna," etc.

In the days upon which the story opens the Union Pacific Railroad had not been completed. The West was largely "Indian country." Range was free; fences unknown. But already the cattle outfits, big and small, had united in the warning that sheepmen must stay out. The Basques—herders for centuries—were already in California. The great drought of 1862 began. The grass was gone. They had to follow it, as sheepmen ever have done. Nevada became their goal. Received with hatred and contempt, they repaid in kind. In a powerful story of such verisimilitude that at times it seems more like history than fiction, the author tells the story of what they accomplished there, of the part they played in the upbuilding of Nevada, of their isolation. Mr. Drago knows Nevada, as he has proven before.

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### Trevalion

By W. E. NORRIS

Author of "Next of Kin," "Brown Amber," etc.

The scene is laid in Cornwall and deals with the fortunes and misfortunes of a family long established in that country. The hero—or at least the principal figure—is the elder son and heir, a young man whose life is clouded by an episode in the War which seemed to show him as having lacked courage at a critical moment. He is not really a coward, and no one thinks he is; yet, as he cannot from the nature of the case absolutely clear himself, he remains oppressed by that shadow throughout. His vicissitudes, amatory and otherwise, make this an interesting and absorbing story.

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### The House of the Seven Keys

By MARY E. and THOMAS W. HANSHEW

Author of "The Amber Junk," "The House of Discord," etc.

This is the clever story of a jewel robbery and of the efforts which are made to solve the mystery. The plot is woven with great skill and the reader is led forward from incident to thrilling incident until the final *denouement*. The characterisation is subtle; and so startling is the element of reality that the reader feels that he is obtaining a real view of the underworld from its pages.

## Hutchinson's New Novels. 7/6 Net

### Allen Adair

By JANE MANDER

Author of "The Strange Attraction," etc.

This is a fine story dealing with an up-country ranch in New Zealand towards the end of the last century. It tells of a man who in the town is a complete failure, yet finds that his life in the open country is a success. He marries a simple, rather narrow-minded girl; and this is the story of the life of these two on their ranch in New Zealand and of the conflict between his ideals and her temperament. The author of this book has succeeded with rare skill in creating the atmosphere of a New Zealand ranch. It is a story of the pioneers of Empire.

### Shoe-Bar Stratton

By JOSEPH B. AMES

A story of love and adventure set in the Western cow country, which is nowadays adding to its perennial lure the prospect of sudden dazzling fortune through oil wells. Mr. Ames transports his readers to the great open spaces with their far horizons, and plunges them into the thrilling battle a plucky girl is waging to save her ranch. Strange things are happening at the Shoe-Bar—and she has no clue to them. The cowboys do not stay, disaster pursues the herds—from cattle-rustlers to blackleg. Stratton, wounded in the World War, recovers his memory after the lapse of a year. He returns to his ranch and finds it in the hands of a girl who inherited it from her father. He decides to work there as a cowboy, determine the innocence or complicity of the girl, fathom the rumours or queer happenings. There is action, suspense, interest, and an appealing love story.

### The Hand of a Thousand Rings

By ROBERT BACHMANN

This is a delightful volume of short stories all of which have a Chinese setting. Mr. Robert Bachmann has a real knowledge of the Chinese: he has more, he has an understanding and sympathy for them. He knows their ways, their habits, their minds; he understands what gives them pleasure and what gives them pain. In this book he draws with a delightfully facile pen Chinese men and maidens in many circumstances. Each story is complete in itself. Thrills alternate with clever description, and the whole atmosphere of the book is redolent of the mystery and subtlety of the East.

### Oak and Iron

JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of "Beyond the Outposts," "Without Gloves," etc.

David Gaunt, strong man of the North, met and married Jean McDougall. She is reported drowned, and Gaunt marries again. This time, however, he has chosen a soulless woman whose chief aim in life is pleasure and comfort. She hates the rugged existence of the North. This marriage has a strange and fearful outcome, and the children of the two marriages are caused much unhappiness. With great skill the author deftly weaves his strange plot. The story, however, by reason of a strange discovery, ends in happiness.

## Hutchinson's New Novels. 7/6 Net

### **The Rector of Wyck**

By MAY SINCLAIR

Author of "A Cure of Souls," "Arnold Waterlow" (8th edition), etc.

In John Crawford, Rector of Wyck, Miss May Sinclair vividly portrays the ideal country parson, a strong, unselfish soul beloved throughout his life of constant well-doing from one end of his parish to the other. His wife, formerly a light-hearted, cynical society girl who had professed herself to be an infidel, is drawn gently by his love back to the Christian belief. From his children John Crawford has high hopes, but his son turns out a wastrel and his daughter a prig. This novel is a most powerful and compelling psychological study in which four distinctly different characters stand out in strong relief against a cleverly-drawn background.

### **Temescal**

By H. H. KNIBBS

Author of "Wild Horses," "Partners of Chance," etc.

A man of mystery is Temescal, broad-browed, benevolent, slow and wise in speech, quick and sometimes violent in action. Through fortune and misfortune Temescal maintains his serene and kindly outlook on his fellowmen. Throughout his startling Mexican adventures he is the epitome of ancient wisdom and almost godlike comprehension. He is also whimsical, humorous and charming. Among the many Western novels such a story as "Temescal" stands out for its richness of characterisation, for its beauty of style and for originality of situation. The story is, in its way, an epic of golden sunshine and the rainbow-tinted beauty of the desert.

### **The World We Live In**

By ALGERNON CECIL

Betty, an aristocratic and fashionable girl, marries a Labour Member of Parliament. Their different views and temperaments naturally conflict, and there is nothing for it but divorce. Betty's next adventure in matrimony is a rich, ambitious young peer who looks upon her merely as an adornment to his home and as an aid to his own political advancement. She leaves him and goes to Rome, where her first husband meets her and finds that he still loves her. There is an interesting ending to this well-told story of to-day.

### **The Amber Merchant**

By PEGGY WEBLING

Author of "Boundary House," "The Fruitless Orchard," etc.

This is a tale of love in London, beginning six years ago and ending at the time when the last page is turned. The interest centres around two sisters, Florence and Edith Wortley. The former is a bright, sophisticated girl, who earns her living, until she marries, as an artist's model. She will be found, by the way, very different from the artists' models of impossible romance or sordid adventure. Edith is a dim reflection—a far-away echo of her sister. The amber merchant, so named in mockery by his first customer, keeps a shop in Vauxhall Bridge Road which is ordinary enough to outward seeming, but with a hidden, mysterious stock of great price. Amber glows on every page of the book, and all that can be told of its history and age-long charm, its attraction and many values, is interwoven with the story of Florence Wortley and her lover.



**The Ace of Blades** By CHARLES B. STILSON

Part Author of "The Island God Forgot"

This is the tale of Denys, an unknown boy whom a broken-down master of the sword bought at a gipsy camp-fire and trained into an incomparable swordsman, whom a great King's selfishness summoned from obscurity and sent on a mad errand, the echoes of whose sword-music set all North France to ringing, whose blade unaided kept Louis Quatorze firm on his throne and saved France from the Spaniard, who cut a way through treacheries to riches and honour, and who won at the point of his long rapier something more precious in his eyes than them all. This is the tale of a red-haired girl. The story is told with spirit and fire, steel crosses steel, and a red-haired girl's heart beats fast; two horses drip lather, and one has run her heart out; but the honour of France is safe.

**A Romance of Three Ladies** By J. G. SARASIN

Author of "Chronicles of a Cavalier," etc.

This is the thrilling story of the "Night-Hawk," a Royalist of the time of the French Revolution, who has planned to get the Dauphin out of prison. With skill and daring he impersonates one of the Revolutionary generals, and while so disguised he is seen and loved by Lady Marne. Later she learns that he is not a Revolutionary, but her great love survives this ordeal. She sees the Revolutionary general guillotined and believes that her lover has suffered death. His flair for adventure, however, brings the "Night-Hawk" through all dangers, and later in England the lovers are united.

**The Autocrat** By PEARL DOLES BELL

Author of "Sandra," etc.

This is the story of a woman who comes to see her real self. The selfish, pampered, designing product of an effete civilisation. The author in this book gives a psychological analysis of a woman's soul that has not been surpassed by any other writer of the day. "The Autocrat" is a story that grips both the emotions, and the imagination; a story that alternately bids for pity and condemnation for the proud daughter of a long line who believes herself helplessly enmeshed through an alliance with one of an alien race.

**The Rangers' Code** By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

Author of "The Black Star," etc.

When Sheriff Tom Thomas sizes up Dick Ganley as a likely man to be sent as a deputy to Cactusville, he explains to the young adventurer from Texas that Cactusville is run by a gang of bad men. The head of the gang is called "The King of Cactusville," but no one knows who he really is. Ganley sets out to break the gang. The first move, however, of his enemies is to kidnap the young girl whom he loves. The rogue who runs Cactusville is the man responsible. He takes the girl to an isolated cabin and there offers her the alternative of marriage or dishonour. The thrilling outcome of this story is told in masterly style, and the attention of the reader is held to the very end.

## Hutchinson's New Novels. 7/6 Net

### **Fleurette of Four Corners**

By G. B. BURGIN

Author of "The Shutters of Silence," "The Kiss," etc., etc.

"Fleurette of Four Corners," alias Mlle. de Crespigny, of Old France, is a beautiful girl living with her father, who has sought refuge in an old château on the bank of the Ottawa River. She is persecuted by the attentions of a scoundrel who has a hold on her father and wishes to marry her. Her lover comes from France to find her, and the villain of the story promptly proceeds to get him out of the way, an attempt which is frustrated by "Old Man" Evans, his friend Ikey, and Mr. Burgin's immortal mule, Miss Wilks. The story is full of incident, with many pathetic and humorous scenes, and shows the author at his best when Fleurette rides out of the story even as she had ridden into it, and the two old cronies are left happily together.

### **Her Story and His : A Story of a Trial Marriage** By HER AND HIM

This is the story of a young and beautiful New England woman who is married to and divorced by a detestable millionaire and of a young English author whom she afterwards loves. Despite her puritanism he persuades her to live with him, and for long months they are happy. Then she discovers that he is unfaithful and, heartbroken, leaves him. The book is written in a new and original fashion. Both the woman and the man relate the story of their love, and the reader obtains the experience of having the temperaments and characters of both put before him by their narratives. This book forms both an interesting tale and a clever psychological study.

### **The Mystery of the Summerhouse**

By HORACE HUTCHINSON

Author of "The Fate of Osmund Brett," etc.

A woman, young, beautiful, well-born, rich—murdered; a husband suspected, almost beyond possibility of doubt; later exonerated no less completely; her lover condemned to death as her murderer; and the final solving of the mystery—these are the main elements in the story, whose principal aim is to show how easily and how convincingly the innocent may be found guilty in the eye of the law.

### **Little Tiger**

By ANTHONY HOPE

Author of "The Dolly Dialogues," etc.

This story is a fine piece of writing, clever and ironic. The story is told by one Merridew, an inconspicuous character who is a friendly onlooker playing a not very important part in the story. The work is extraordinarily clever and delicate. As one reads it one is reminded by its delicate sarcasms and brilliant descriptions of that other fine book, "The Dolly Dialogues." It is cleverly written and sparkles with epigrams from the first page last.

## Hutchinson's New Novels. 7/6 Net

### **The Whisper on the Stair** By LYON MEARSON

The weirdness and mystery of a lonely, "haunted" house creep into every line of this thrilling story. The stairs creak at night and silent shadows slip along the walls. "Dead" men return from the grave; living, intangible "ghosts" come and go. The thrills are continuous. The reader is swept along on a brimming tide of uncanny adventures that leap from one baffling chapter to another.

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### **Ropes of Sand**

By M. P. WILLCOCKS

A middle-aged man and woman have done well in the world together, but chiefly through the woman's power and charm. Circumstances then bring the man, Firmin Bradbeer, back to the surroundings in which he passed his childhood. There he reveals what has always lain dormant in him before the eyes of his wife. It is as though a curtain goes up before her. The tale is one of a crime and its consequences, and of the "pull" of the soil on those who really belong to it.

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### **Driftwood**

By the BARONESS ALBERT SADOINE

This poignant story tells of Elizabeth, a young and beautiful widow who is of a weak and vacillating nature. In trying to break away from her smart and dashing set, she becomes engaged to an Englishman who is solid, clean and honourable. Business takes him to America, and Elizabeth, left alone without the protecting influence of her lover, endeavours to numb the loneliness by joining her set down south. There she meets an Italian nobleman, who falls deeply in love with her. The girl is attracted yet somewhat frightened, and leaves Rome for a friend's estate in Northern Italy. To this place the Italian follows her, and in a weak moment she succumbs to his ardent wooing. He is observed emerging from the girl's bedroom by his late mistress who, mad with jealousy, tells the Englishman of his fiancée's betrayal. The ending of this thrilling story is instinct with drama.

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### **The Flame in the South** By LUKE HANSARD

His father having been killed in a movement to free his country, a boy is brought up in a dull Victorian home in England. Blood, however, is too strong. He goes out to join Garibaldi, and fights in a successful campaign. Out there he meets a girl whom he loves, and though they are unsuited, he marries her. Once more the Italians are called upon to make a last effort to save their country. He hastens to join them. He finds on his return that his wife has deserted him. Time passes by until, in 1914, he finds that Europe is again in arms. An old man, he leaves once more for Italy, and there dies gloriously in the service of his beloved country.

## Hutchinson's New Novels. 7/6 Net

### **The Voice from the Dark** By EDEN PHILLPOTTS

Author of "The Red Redmaynes," "The Grey Room,"  
"The Three Brothers," "Redcliff," etc.

Here is a tale of mystery and adventure written with great originality and power. It ranks with the best efforts of Poe, that master of the dramatic thrill. It deals with a crime so monstrous and cruel as to challenge credibility. Yet, with that deft simplicity which is the mark of genius, the author shows us how, in truth, it might have come about. And with fitting preservation of reality and logic he carries us step by step along the dark and devious road of his theme without an instant's faltering of the swift, compelling pace, to an astounding climax of retributive justice, ingenious, convincing, and heartily satisfying.

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### **"OM"**

By TALBOT MUNDY

Author of "Guns of the Gods," etc.

Mr. Talbot Mundy's new and exciting story, "OM," is considered to be the best thing he has ever written. Critics who were privileged to hear the manuscript read aloud have called it "a second 'Kim,'" and there is no doubt that this stirring tale of the East is going to be immensely popular.

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### **Criminal Yarns**

By T. C. BRIDGES

This is a cleverly-written book of stories dealing with the criminal, his character and his habits. They are written by one who knows his subject. The author is especially ingenious in his stories of convicts escaping and the complications that ensue. These stories are not merely sensational, but have a distinctly human touch.

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### **John Dover**

By MARGARET CAMERON

Author of "The Involuntary Chaperon," "Tangles," etc.

The story of Ned Proctor, who elopes with the girl of his heart. They are pursued by the girl's uncle Amos, whom Ned knocks down. Amos hits his head on a stone and dies, and Ned is sent to prison, but escapes and goes to California as John Dover. There, after some thirty years, he finally settles down at Santa Barbara, where he is highly respected. One Frederick Barclay, born ten years after his uncle Amos was killed, visits Santa Barbara and meets a charming and vivacious young widow, Judith Kent, who introduces him to her very dear friend "John Dover." Frederick sees a striking resemblance to one of the Proctor family, but decides that this cannot be the wild Ned Proctor he has heard about. Finally he learns the truth. By this time he is madly in love with Judith and greatly admires old John. How, through his puritanical respect for "the law," he feels bound to denounce John as an escaped convict, and how finally he succeeds in getting an official pardon for John, is the stirring *dénouement* of this vivid story.



## Hutchinson's New Novels. 7/6 Net

### The Carolinian

By RAFAEL SABATINI

Author of "The Sea Hawk," "The Snare," "Scaramouche,"  
"The Tavern Knight," etc.

A romance of South Carolina in the days when England's power over her American colonies was in the balance ; when the sturdy independences of the Colonials was asserting itself against the misguided rule of George III.'s satellites. Against this background is enacted the drama of the lives of the intrepid young Carolinian, Harry Latimer, and Myrtle, the beautiful girl coming from the opposite political camp, whom he makes his wife. The story is fashioned as only the master-hand of Rafael Sabatini could fashion it, and the deeds of Washington and others whose names have become immortal form thrilling themes which are closely interwoven with the narrative of the book.

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### A Sarahan Love-story

By A. L. VINCENT

This is the story of a girl who, for wealth and position, sacrifices her life and marries a rich satyr. His cruelty and neglect at length break her heart, and following some rash words of hers he is found dead. How she tries to return to her former lover, and how he in disgust leaves her, form the *dénouement* of this striking story.

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### The Second Establishment

By DOLF WYLLARDE

Author of "They Also Serve," etc.

This story tells of a man who has no real home. He is wealthy but unhappy, for his wife is hard, callous, and self-satisfied. One day he meets his ideal mate and her need calls to his. Ill-treated, and mentally tortured by a husband who is an abominable drug-fiend, she is glad to find sanctuary in the shelter of her lover's arms. Together they live a simple and happy home life in a busy quarter of London. The ending to their romance comes in startling and dramatic fashion.

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### The Candlestick Makers

By LUCILLE BORDEN

In this new book Mrs. Borden, who will be pleasantly remembered for her novel of last year, "The Gates of Olivet," tells a story of Society life which touches upon certain vital problems of the day. The sharply-drawn characters include Diana Travers, whose eagerness for life and new experience brings her near to tragedy, which she is able to avert only by her innate wholesomeness and idealism ; simple, sweet-minded Faith ; Uncle Michael, who longs so for children of his own, but has only a dream child ; Hilda, Michael's wife—hard, selfish, and unhappy ; Hana, Matsuo, and Passiflore, a fascinating trio whose lives are embedded in mystery ; and Donald, Diana's lover. These are but a few of the interesting men and women whom the reader will enjoy meeting.

## Hutchinson's New Novels. 7/6 Net

### **The Mystery of the Evil Eye** By ANTHONY WYNNE

A thrilling and vividly-written detective story which is quite above the average. Sir William Armand, a prominent lawyer, is found murdered in a Northumbrian wood near his home immediately after he has ordered his daughter to break off her engagement with the man she loves. A certain Dr. Hailey, who is in touch with Scotland Yard, takes up the baffling case. A multiplicity of clues present themselves, but the girl's unfortunate fiancé is arrested as the murderer. With consummate skill, Dr. Hailey unexpectedly solves the perplexing mystery, and the guilty parties reap their just reward. The unique methods of Dr. Hailey are brilliant, and he is destined to attract a vast audience of admirers.

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### **The Threshold of Fear** By ARTHUR J. REES

Author of "Cups of Silence," etc.

This is the extraordinary story of a young man, of whom it is foretold that the beating of a drum will warn him of his death. While living on a remote Cornish moor he hears at the dead of night the dreadful drum-beats. Does this really foretell his death? Is it the work of an enemy? Are the sounds made by a supernatural agency? These are the questions which present themselves. Their solution forms the startling and vividly-written *dénouement* of this novel.

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### **The Black Cat** By ARTHUR MILLS

This is an original and intensely-exciting mystery story. It tells of a search for treasure in South America. The hero is an Englishman of resource and daring, and his adventures carry one from climax to climax. The whole story is written with a knowledge of South America and its history which is truly astonishing. It is a book which will thrill from the first line to the last.

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### **The Wonderful Wooing** By DOUGLAS WALSHE

This is the original story of how a debonair ex-officer of the Royal Air Force wins the woman he loves. Martin Hayward by chance buys a pamphlet dealing with the constructive power of thought. Though he scoffs at its advance, he unconsciously puts it into practice, and it enables him to meet the girl of his dreams, an heiress in her own right. Then through sheer strength of purpose he at last wins his lady's hand from a much-favoured rival.

## Hutchinson's New Novels. 7/6 Net

### Up Hill, Down Dale

By EDEN PHILLPOTTS

Author of "Redcliff," "The Three Brothers," etc.

Eden Phillpotts is already well known as a short story writer. He weaves his plots with great ingenuity and a true vein of humour around Devonshire characters. In this volume he has collected some of his best stories. They will appeal to all interested in the short story and to all lovers of fiction

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### The Green Ray

By VANCE THOMPSON

Author of "The Pointed Tower," "Spinners of Life," etc.

The Pierian fountain of youth has been dry these many years, and yet the world waits with a cup in its hand. Along come scientists every now and then with the cry, "Here is the way to regain youth," and the world sighs with longing. Rejuvenation intrigued Vance Thompson and he spun around the idea of it the absorbing story of "The Green Ray." Now "The Green Ray" is to rejuvenation what two lines are to an acute angle. Only Mr. Thompson fills the space between the lines with mystery, action, romance, and some mighty good characterisation. Old Hiram wants youth and Dr. Cree is willing, although secretive. Comes Hiram, young, fresh with the vigour of life, and lingers around Madelon—strange, exotic Madelon. There are thrilling events and strange happenings in this exciting story.

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### The Passionate Trail

By ALAN HILLGARTH

Harry Chester agrees to join a friend in an attempt to frustrate a gigantic plot that is being hatched in the heart of the desert to crush the English in Egypt. Scarcely has he done so when his friend is murdered. The police arrest Harry, but he manages to escape. There and then he swears that he will not only frustrate this amazing scheme but that he will also avenge the death of his friend. After many adventures he is consigned to the care of a Sheik, whom he finds is only pretending to be a friend and is really one of the chief plotters against the English. How he is saved from death under exceptional circumstances and the amazing *dénouement* of this story make thrilling reading

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*A brilliant First Novel by a new writer*

### Major Dane's Garden

A story of love and passion, of renunciation and the promise of future happiness, laid under the burning skies of Somaliland. Rhona, the heroine, married out of the schoolroom to a man many years her senior, has to wrestle with the difficulties of life in a tropical country as well as with those that beset the path of a woman who has made the Great Mistake. The book is one that should hold the reader from beginning to end, as much for its word-painting of conditions in Somaliland as for the appeal and interest of the story.

## Hutchinson's Successful New Books

### Four Plays

By COSMO HAMILTON

Author of "The Rustle of Silk," "Unwritten History," etc.  
"THE NEW POOR," "SCANDAL," "THE SILVER FOX," "THE MOTHER  
WOMAN."

This volume contains the four most recently produced plays by the author of "The Blindness of Virtue," "The Mountain Climber," "The Wisdom of Folly," and many others. "The Silver Fox" was welcomed by the critics of New York and Chicago as the most finished and brilliant comedy that had been written for many years. "Scandal," in which is shown the regeneration of a "flapper," is one of the greatest successes of its time.

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### *To be Published Shortly*

### The Passer-By and Other Stories

By ETHEL M. DELL

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### A New Novel

By DOROTHEA CONYERS

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### A New Novel

By JOHN AYSCOUGH

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### A New Novel

By KATHLYN RHODES

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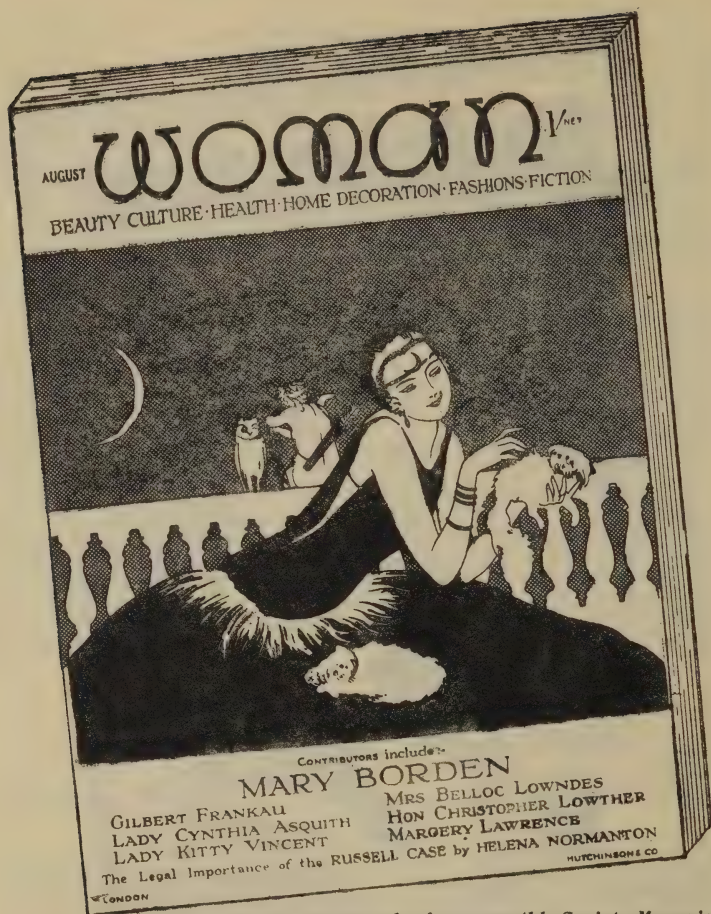
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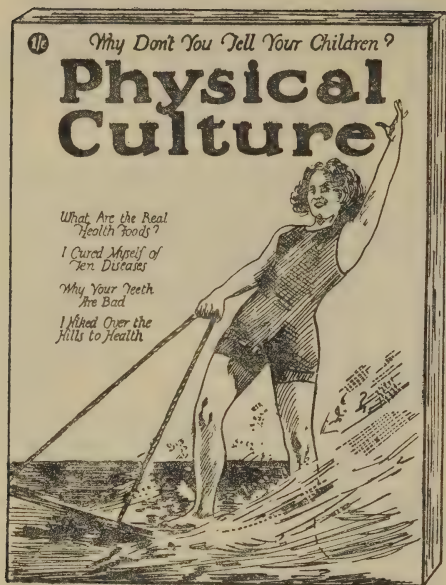
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